
The Future Project Culture¹

Selecting the Next PM²

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Introduction

Today's literature, whether in textbooks or journals such as PMWJ, abounds with great articles about current and future developments in project management. Sometimes, the articles focus upon the mistakes made by project managers and how we can make corrections so that project managers do not repeat the mistakes.

What the literature usually does not discuss are the project management mistakes or actions taken by management that led to problems. In this article, we will look back in time to the early years of project management growth, which is something nice to do occasionally, and look at some of the decisions made by management. Some of these situations still exist today.

Excellence of leading in the future cultures, requires us to learn from those past situations and adapt the profile of the next generation of program and project managers to respond to the societal demands for the mega change and transformation initiatives that will shape tomorrow's landscape. The level of transparency, intense collaboration, and high degree of innovation and creativity that tomorrow's PMs will have to bring to the table, is a critical quality. Engaging leadership matters and true cultural excellence for delivering value in projects and programs will rest on the shoulders of this new generation of leaders.

¹ This series of articles is by Dr. Harold Kerzner and Dr. Al Zeitoun, the co-authors, along with Dr. Ricardo Vargas, of the textbook *Project Management Next Generation: The Pillars for Organizational Excellence*, published by Wiley in 2022. Learn more about the authors in their profiles at the end of this article.

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The Journey of Selecting the Project Manager

In the early years of project management, the heaviest users of the discipline were construction companies and the aerospace and defense industry contractors. Almost all of the project managers were engineers, as expected, since the bulk of the projects were technical.

In the aerospace and defense industry, most PMs had advanced degrees. A vice president for engineering in an aerospace and defense contractor was asked who they assign as PMs. She responded that the best PMs are engineers with advanced degrees, and especially those that also possess good writing skills.

Not all engineers had good writing skills. The aerospace and defense industry contractors solved the problem by creating technical writing departments. Whenever a PM was required to write a technical or status report, a representative from the technical writing department would assist the PM in transforming the words the PM used into expressions that are easily understood and grammatically correct.

While it seemed like the right thing to do, assigning engineers with advanced degrees to the high technology projects, there were risks. Some of the engineers viewed the assignment as a PM as a chance to increase their image and reputation by trying to exceed the specifications rather than just meeting requirements. The result was often a significant increase in the budget due to scope changes.

This occurred frequently on Department of Defense (DoD) contracts where the DoD decision-makers were military officers. The military officers also viewed exceeding the specifications as enhancements to their career, and knowing that their replacement after their tour of duty ends would be responsible for explaining the rationale for the increase in the government's budget.

Today, just about anyone can have the opportunity to serve as a project manager if they are educated properly in project and/or program management. In many cases, some of the best PMs don't come from the classical engineering background.

Educating Project Managers

Almost all of the government contracts were issued with well-defined statements of work (SOWs). The problems the PMs had to solve and the decisions to be made were almost always technical. As such, the educational emphasis was on technical training programs. Project management, for the most part, was in the embryonic stage and companies did not see the need for educating people in interpersonal skills.

The one course that was taught at just about every contractor's organization was the design and use of the Earned Value Management System (EVMS). Government agencies had a multitude of contractors, and each contractor had their own unique way or reporting status. The government was finding it difficult to determine the true status of some of the projects, and therefore created the EVMS to standardize status reporting.

Most companies designed and implemented a singular project management methodology built around the EVMS. Educating the organization on EVMS also included instructing the people on how to use the forms, guidelines, templates, and checklists that accompanied the singular methodology.

Future project managers could benefit from finding the most fitting techniques that match tomorrow's projects' demands fluidly.

Preparing Project Managers

Today, project and program managers are trained using a multitude of educational packages. But years ago, companies believed that PMs should understand how each of the functional units operates and the impact that the PM's decisions could have on each organizational unit. As such, potential PMs would be temporarily assigned to various functional units for a short period of time to understand how each unit operates.

Executives trust project and program managers to make decisions in the best interest of the company and the stakeholders. But in the early years, senior management was fearful that PMs would make decisions in their own best interest and would also make decisions that were reserved for the senior levels of management.

Unwilling to provide PMs with complete trust, senior management assigned project sponsors to every project. The role of the sponsor was to ensure that the PMs were making the correct decisions. Since almost all of the PMs were engineers, the PMs were allowed to make technical decisions, but almost all project business related decisions had to be made, or at least approved, by the project sponsors that resided at the senior levels of management.

In addition, on almost all government contracts, the contractor's project management team included an assistant project manager for contracting and procurement. Sponsors were fearful that the PMs had very little knowledge in these two areas and needed assurance that all decisions and procurement activities abided by legal consideration.

In many companies, the lack of trust ended up creating policies whereby most of the communication with customers and stakeholders was provided by the project sponsors. The sponsors were afraid that the PMs would agree to scope changes that were not funded. In some companies, the situation backfired when sponsors authorized unfunded scope changes to appease the customers and then told the PMs to accomplish the additional work within the original budget.

Additional Learning along the Journey

One of the reasons for rotating PMs through various functional departments, even though it was only for a short time, was to provide them with an understanding of how the department functions. The belief was this would help the PMs develop the best possible project plans.

When many of the project plans failed, senior management made the decision to create a planning department that had the responsibility to produce the project plans for several of the projects. The sponsors usually made the decision as to who would be responsible for project plan development based upon the trust they had in the assigned PMs.

In addition to a planning department, several government contractors created a cost control department. The intent was to standardize the project's status in compliance with EVMS. The department served as the "bridge" between the company's singular methodology and compliance with EVMS reports.

Project sponsors attended most of the meetings with the clients and stakeholders and dominated the discussions even though the PMs were in attendance. Meetings held in the contractor's company were morning meetings. The meetings would adjourn at lunchtime. During lunchtime, the minutes of the meeting were prepared, and the clients and stakeholders were then expected to sign off on the minutes before departing. Today, many of these meetings are now virtual.

Government agencies, especially DoD, often conducted brainstorming sessions for new ideas for products for military use. DoD was unsure what they wanted, and the sessions were conducted before any contract would be awarded.

DoD invited all of the potential aerospace and defense contractors that might bid on the contract to attend the brainstorming session. The expectation was that the contractors would send their best possible technical people to present ideas for future DoD contracts. This would certainly help DoD.

While the intent appeared sound, the contractors most often refused to present their ideas for fear that their competitors could capitalize on the ideas and win future contracts. The result was the contractors sent some of their best technical people with instructions not to present any critical information but to listen to what others are saying and take notes.

Stakeholders Project Management Knowledge

In the early years of project management, stakeholders were interested in the results and deliverables rather than understanding how project management was designed to work. Sponsors handled most of the communications with the clients and stakeholders for fear that clients might meddle in the execution of the project and try to change the project's direction without any understanding of how project management was supposed to work. Today, stakeholders are knowledgeable about project management practices, and we welcome their participation.

THE PATH FORWARD

Shifts in how we select future project and program managers is a must. In a future where digitization will change everything we do, the future PM is the ultimate **Empathizer**. Investing in selecting PMs who are strong leaders, able to see their initiatives with a holistic lens, and who are capable of making many of the decisions that previously sponsors had to make, is the right step towards being an effective PM.

It is vital that tomorrow's PMs are equipped with the proper understanding of the PM practices, yet most valuable would be their ability to remain highly humble and open to the multitude of additional learning and insights that will come their way. The path forward requires investment in PMs who can lead in continual uncertainty and thrive under the endlessly changing conditions. This assumes that we have a new breed of sponsors who know how to get out of the way of the PM and are there to help in connecting some of the business dots, and most importantly to take any of the bigger rocks out of the way of this next generation of leaders. The *Next Gen* PMs would need to be prepared to be the **CEOs of their initiatives** as they create the critically needed future transformations.

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Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.

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- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.
 - The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
 - The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
 - The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
 - Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
 - The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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Dr. Al Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his

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In his current role with Siemens, he is a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for overseeing the Program Management's Community of Excellence, driving the global program management practices to enhance strategic alignment, and the enablement of the Academic Program in support of the Strategic Transformation priorities. His role also covers ensuring the critical integration of current and future Global Sustainability principles to meet the expectations of Industry 4.0.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at zeitounstrategy@gmail.com