

THE IMPACT OF EGOS ON PROJECT MANAGEMENT ¹

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THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING EGOS _____

The growth and importance of project management leadership and the behavioral side of project management have brought to the surface the necessity to effectively manage ego-driven behaviors demonstrated by the project team members. Potential issues can arise when project managers or team members have ego issues that can impact project performance. Ego issues could have an impact on how team members work together, how decisions are made, and how successful the outcome of the project will be.

Not all situations surrounding egos are detrimental. An effective understanding of egos can be highly beneficial in project management if egos are understood and controlled. We tend to think about egos in negative terms such as having a negative ego that can incur problems and alienate colleagues. But there are also positive egos that can be highly beneficial in project management practices. Both types will be discussed in this article with an emphasis on the correlation to the project management environment.

GENERIC TYPES OF EGOS _____

We all have an ego that impacts how we react to favorable and unfavorable situations, such as on projects. Our ego also impacts our relationship with others, such as project team members and stakeholders. Egos help people understand themselves better and how important they believe themselves to be.

Egos generally fall into two categories: positive and negative egos. A positive ego focuses on bringing us some degree of happiness even in unfavorable situations. As an example, if mistakes are made on a project, a positive ego allows us to view it as a learning experience. It also prevents us from overreacting. As another example, you are working on a project with requirements that may not be achievable. With a positive ego, you feel calm and grateful to be assigned to this challenging project despite the difficulties. Project failure is seen as an opportunity for the future rather than a personal failure.

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With a negative ego, you might feel misery and pain due to the difficult situation you are in and begin complaining. You might try to transfer the misery and pain you feel to others and make them feel responsible for your assignment on this difficult project. Workers do not want to be around people and team members that demonstrate negative egos.

People with positive egos navigate challenges and do not try to hurt others with their words, actions or body language. Positive egos reduce tension regardless of the situation. Emphasis is placed upon identifying possible favorable outcomes.

THE TECHNICAL SUPERIORITY EGO

The behavioral issues associated with project management have been well known since the early days of project management. One of the most common egos discussed in the early years of project management was the technical superiority ego among engineers.

In the 1970s, an aerospace and defense contractor had most of their project teams composed of engineers with advanced degrees in technical disciplines. While this appeared to be a good approach with good intentions, it was accompanied by significant behavioral issues, specifically involving egos related to technical achievements.

Many of the engineers were extremely proud of their professional skills and were not happy just meeting the specifications in the requirements for the projects. If they could exceed the specification requirements, this would inflate their egos in dealing with their peers and enhance their image and reputation in the company. The technical superiority ego, which was based upon innovation and creativity opportunities, resulted in the promotion of scope changes or performing additional technical efforts without informing senior management, clients, or stakeholders.

Adding more scope to a project after project go-ahead was a common practice on most of these projects and the final cost could be as much as 400 percent over the original budget, or even higher. Most of the engineers were not overly concerned about the cost overrun since funding was supplied by government agencies. Senior management was aware that this was happening but remained silent because there was often significant success, resulting in more future contracts.

The company realized the ego problems and was unsure about the best way to manage them. The company created a position on many project teams entitled "Assistant Project Manager (APM) for interpersonal skills. One of the APMs commented that he often knew very little about the technology on the projects. His job was to work with the project managers to resolve interpersonal skills problems and reduce the impact of conflicts resulting from behavioral issues from positive or negative egos. He commented that ego management was one of his biggest concerns. If the outcome of the technical superiority

ego was favorable, it was regarded as a positive ego. In other companies where clients became disenchanted with the cost overruns and cancelled some of the contracts, reference was made to negative egos. The difference between a positive and negative ego in this example was whether the client or stakeholders were hurt because of the egos.

UNHEALTHY EGOS

There are several types of unhealthy egos including arrogance, selfishness, insecurity, trying to please everyone regardless of the consequences, acting rebellious, and wanting to be a manipulator by having everything done your way. The most common results of unhealthy egos in projects include micromanagement, resistance to feedback, poor project collaboration, a reluctance to accept accountability and many behavioral conflicts needing resolution.

Good project managers understand that they may have limitations and must recognize and manage their own ego issues first by controlling their own emotions and impulses. Project managers must remember that they are leading by example.

The biggest ego challenge is usually with team members. Just one team member that demonstrates ego issues can significantly disrupt the performance of other team members. Project managers may need to meet with this team member, perhaps periodically, in a one-on-one session discussing their behavior and seeking a mutual solution to ego problems.

EXECUTIVE EGO ISSUES

Ego issues in project management are not restricted only to the workforce. Project sponsors and executive management can also have significant ego issues that can create chaos and alienate the workforce. When executives create problems due to their egos, workers generally respond in a manner that protects their employment in the firm and future opportunities. The workers may be totally unsupportive of what they must do but follow through the best they can.

As an example, in a high technology company, the workforce knew that the president was planning to retire in a few years. The president had an ego situation where he wanted to be remembered in history books as the pioneer of the technology that his company helped create. His reputation was the driver of his ego. He disregarded the budgets established by his vice presidents and almost bankrupted the company by funding several projects to

be completed before he retires. Workers were removed from their normal duties to work on these projects.

The vice presidents clearly understood the president's intentions and the damage he was doing to the company because of his ego. The vice presidents met with the company's Board of Directors and forced the president into early retirement. Many of the projects were then downsized or cancelled. The president's ego almost destroyed the company.

The president's actions are components of an "inflated ego." Characteristics of an inflated ego include an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a desire to boast, and acting in a hostile manner. Because of the position they maintain in the company, they may refuse to accept criticism, act in a defensive manner, and constantly seek admiration from colleagues.

MANAGING PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS EGOS

Project managers must develop a mindset for addressing ego issues by promoting and demonstrating humility, compassion, active listening, empathy, trust, resilience, flexibility, practicing self-control and valuing the contributions of team members. This will create a "positive ego" image in the eyes of the team members allowing project managers to overcome issues constructively.

Future project managers must possess empathy qualities that enable them to sense whether the project team members' egos will play out as positive or negative. This comes from close engagement with the team, deep listening, and by creating an environment where the practice of positive behaviors could prevail. Project team members exhibiting the right behaviors could be used as an example to demonstrate what the esteemed team culture looks like.

Project managers have the responsibility to galvanize the energy of the project team towards focusing on what matters for achieving project success. This requires a proper integration of the project team's capabilities including the best utilization of their egos. When properly managed, this continues to be valuable in designing the future project workforce.

THE PATH FORWARD

Project cultures matter! The proper supportive culture can provide the building blocks to reduce the impact some negative egos and scale the benefits of the positive egos. Future

project managers should carefully invest in building the right project team culture that supports the behaviors leading to showcasing the positive side of the project team's egos. Part of the project managers' mission is to have a fully supportive project ecosystem that includes the project executives and the extended groups of project stakeholders.

Project managers should build the safety in the project environment where open and crucial dialogues can take place to highlight any of the ego consequences including both positive and negative ones. In an AI-enabled project management future, this is even more critical, given that the leadership qualities and project team egos remain amongst the most important differentiators for what the project team brings to the table for driving consistency in achieving projects' successes.

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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.

- 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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In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

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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