CHARACTERISTICS TO BEING A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT MANAGER

By Dale Laarz

Many equate Project Management (PM) as an application of best practices, tools, and processes in order to deliver on a defined objective. Of course these elements, appropriately applied, are critical. They are what I would call the 'science' components of PM.

Project Management (PM), however, extends beyond just the 'science' of applying tools and processes. One may say successful PM is 20% science and 80% the art of applying 'soft skills' (human connection). I would take it one step further to say a person who can master the art of applying soft skills, and who lacks the science of PM, is positioned to be a more successful Project Manager than an individual who is stronger on the science of PM and weak on soft skills.

You can have all the processes in the world mapped out and ready to be executed, but, if you are not able to connect with those who need to support and follow those processes you risk not meeting your objectives. More than likely you will find yourself spending more energy on compliance than actual delivery.

Conversely, you can have weak processes and tools, but if the soft skills are engaged you can overcome and still meet your end objective. It is amazing what people can do if motivated and connected together. Having said that, you don't want to deliver projects through super human efforts on an ongoing basis! So, by no means do I suggest relying on soft skills alone. The point is that in order to truly set yourself up for success you need to integrate the soft skills with the application of best practices, processes, etc.

So what are those soft skills that enable a Project Manager to execute successfully? There are of course listening skills, motivational skills, and others, but there are further lower level elements to consider. Here are four specific 'soft skill' characteristics that I suggest, if in tact, will enable a persons success in PM.

Personal Attitude: You have heard the saying that the glass is half full vs. being empty. Unless you are able to approach your projects with positive determination and energy, you can not expect your team to respond positively to what you ask of them.

You can *talk the motivational talk*, but if you are not *walking the motivational wa*lk, others will pick up on it. In other words you can ask your teams to go the extra mile, but if they don't see positive energy from you they will not be that interested in investing their own personal energies.

Patience: This is a great attribute to have. What I am alluding to is the ability to realize that things happen, issues can occur, and people are not YOU. Everyone is different; there are differences in cultures, language comprehension, education, experience, motivators, learning styles, and interpretation skills.

You need to be cognoscente of the differences that exist, and be open to learning from them, and in the end leveraging them. Without patience you end up creating potential conflict.

Passion: This can actually fit with the Attitude category, but is worth calling out on its own. There are two important factors to consider here. One, are you passionate about practicing PM? Second, are you passionate about the projects you are responsible for?

Without being passionate about what you're doing you will not excel individually, nor will your teams excel fully. Without a certain level of passion you won't be looking to be the best at what you can do. You won't be motivated to really embrace and motivate others in what you are doing. It is important to stop and take stock of where you find yourself. Projects are all about people, and it starts with you. You set the tone as a Project Manager.

Humility: Have you worked with someone who thinks they are "The One"? Not fun right! It is so important to realize that a project team is comprised of "team" members. Each member has a certain level of experience and skill to offer to the project. Otherwise why have a team?

If your attitude is one of "I'm the boss and what I say is all that counts!", then you're missing opportunities. Your team will not want to approach you. They will not be interested in learning from you, and they will effectively stay as far away from you as they can. So much for team spirit!

As a Project Manager you have a great opportunity to learn, and learn some more. Then, pass those learning's on yourself. Leverage the team, don't go it alone.

By demonstrating, and employing, a balanced sense of humility your team will respond positively. They will support your lead and back you up! Don't hesitate to ask questions of your team. With the right balanced approach you can maintain your role of influence and strengthen the dynamics of your team at the same time.

Of course we could expand further on each of these soft characteristics; however, the intent of this article is to initiate a level of self examination. Ultimately, for you to assess how you see yourself successfully executing within the PM Field.