

Are your mechanics doing the racecar driving?

By Chris Clucas, President, Aspen Consulting, Inc.

As a person who manages project managers you understand the difficulties involved with watching a project that started out with such promise and potential spiral ever downward with each passing month until the project comes to end with more of a sense of relief than one of elation.

In the first project review your project manager presents you with budget and planning information that looks like this is a sure fire success and the customer is going to be coming back over and over for more work from your organization. By the last project review you are less worried about add-on work than you are about whether the customer is going to sue you!

How does this happen? How do so many projects that start out with such promise end with overrun budgets, missed schedules, and worst of all, unhappy customers?

Have you noticed that in your organization there are some project managers that seem to have a knack of successfully delivering all projects assigned to them? Have you also noticed that there are other project managers that no matter how diligent they are in their job, no matter how much planning and tracking they do, their projects always end up with disappointing results? What would account for this since both groups get the same type of training and have access to the same infrastructure and get the same support from their management?

From my experience the difference lies in the behaviors of the project manager. It has always been interesting to me that project managers are generally selected for their position because of objective reasons yet their success is dependant entirely on subjective attributes.

In most technical organizations, project managers are selected because of the abilities that they have shown in the technical area that they operate in and their knowledge of the tools and services that the company offers.

While this may make sense on the surface it would be similar to picking a racecar driver from the best mechanic in the pit-crew. Nobody does this because it is generally accepted that the job of building and maintaining a racecar requires distinctly separate skills from those needed to drive a racecar. Yet in many companies, it is the best mechanic that gets selected to lead the project.

Being a successful project manager requires an entirely different set of skills than being a successful project team member. Granted there are some project team members that end up being great project managers, but this is due to their own abilities rather than the training and the support they get from their management.

Because face it, while virtually all modern research on project management universally agrees that behavior plays the most critical part of a project manager's success, what do we train them to do? We train them in how to put together a schedule. We train them in how to track the financial aspects of their projects. And if we're really advanced we'll train them in risk

mitigation. And after all this training we scratch our heads in bewilderment when one project after another ends up a failure.

In order to produce successful projects, project managers need to be selected and trained in the areas that will most impact their success. And while putting together project plans, tracking status, and planning for risk is important it is not the crux of the issue.

Over the course of managing hundreds of project managers I have come to the conclusion that there are two things that separate great project managers from the rest: accountability and proactivity. From my experience if you have a project manager that operates accountably and works proactively to ensure success, you have a project manager that will deliver one successful project after another.

Accountability

Accountability is a subjective term. When we speak of someone being accountable we tend to think of this in a reactive way. In other words we tend to think of someone who will take the blame if things go bad. But this is not what I'm talking about.

The sense of accountability that I'm looking for when selecting someone for a project management position is the attitude that they are in charge. That they are the person who's neck is on the line and they are going to extend their power and their influence how ever much they need to in order to make the project a success.

While this is very easy to say it is very difficult for the average person to put into practice on a project because in most cases the project manager is dealing with a whole host of competing factions and egos on a project each with their own agenda and generally they believe that they are in charge of the project.

Think about the project managers that work for you. They have no organizational power. In most cases the people that are working on a project don't formally report to the project manager. At the same time there is a customer trying to push the project manager around and ready to explode at the first sign of a missed schedule. And while all of this is going on the management team is pushing to keep project costs down and asking for continuous streams of data to make sure that the project isn't over budget. Add to the mix that in many companies the project manager is also dealing with a sales team that has their own agenda and you start to understand that finding a person that will be accountable in this type of situation is not an easy task.

In fact I have found that the common reaction to people placed in the role of project manager is to become a victim. It is a natural reaction and very easy for a project manager to do. There are so many things outside their control and so many different agendas that people are pushing in any project that it is altogether too easy for a project manager to throw up the hands in despair and claim, "It's not my fault". This is a victimized project manager. And let me tell you there is nothing more useless in this world than a victimized project manager.

But a project manager that acts in an accountable manner will understand that it is a requirement of the job to build influence and power over all the different people that make up the extended project team and use this power and influence to get them all pointed in the same direction and

working together for the common goal of a successful project. A project manager that behaves accountably doesn't worry about organization charts and roles and responsibilities. This project manager works as a team and understands that if someone on the team drops the ball it is the project manager's responsibility to pick it up.

You, as a leader of project managers, need make sure that you are selecting, training, and coaching your project managers to be accountable. You need to make sure that the people you select as project managers aren't looking for excuses for why they failed. Instead they are looking for ways to make their project successful and doing whatever is needed to make it a success.

Think about it. When you were last looking to hire or promote a project manager how much time did you spend in understanding if that individual was accountable? Or once becoming a project manager how much training did you give that individual to learn how to lead people and how to take charge of a situation without alienating competing interests? And finally, how much time do you spend coaching on how to build influence and what are the proper ways to use this influence?

I would bet in most cases the interview concentrated a lot on technical aspects of the service or product you offer and I would also wager that the normal interactions that your project managers have with management makes them feel like they should have become accountants.

Proactivity

While proactivity is very similar to accountability it is different in my mind. Proactivity is the behavior that a project manager exhibits when doing things that don't have an immediate benefit but lay the seeds for future success. A reactionary project manager, on the other hand, waits for circumstances to dictate actions.

Think once again about the great project managers that you've had work for you. Do they almost seem to make things look easy? Do they seem to always have smooth sailing projects that might encounter a bump every once in a while but never get close to the point of spinning out of control? The big difference in these projects versus the ones with irate customers that are always over budget and slipping schedule lies in the activities that the project manager proactively does to make things go smoothly.

A proactive project manager knows that it is critical to build a strong relationship with the customer and will go out of their way to spend time building this relationship from the very beginning. A reactive project manager, on the other hand, waits until things start going bad before starting to worry about interacting with the customer.

A proactive project manager not only prepares plans and schedules, and budgets before the project starts but also continually probes the end user for hidden expectations and changing needs in order to adapt the project to guarantee success. The reactive project manager may prepare plans, schedules, and budgets for the project but then doesn't do the work to make sure they are constantly updated to reflect what the end user expects or needs.

A proactive project manager spends time every week tracking the market that the customer is in and ensuring that the trends and dynamics that the customer is facing are understood. By doing

this, pressures the customer faces and what needs to be done to address these pressures are well in hand. The reactive project manager doesn't.

I could go on and on about the actions that a proactive project manager takes. Project managers that behave proactively, that know that there are problems with each and every project, and work at uncovering the problems and addressing them early, will always turn in successful projects.

Now think about where proactivity ranks on your selection criteria for new project managers? What are you doing to help make your project managers more proactive? What infrastructure have you put in place to make it easy for a project manager to be proactive? When was the last time you helped your project management team understand the market dynamics of their customers? Or do you expect them to know this on their own? Or worse yet have you never thought about it?

Summary

Proactivity and accountability are the two most critical factors in determining the success of a project manager. From my experience, project managers that have these two attributes will consistently out perform those that do not exhibit them.

Over and over I've seen the scenario repeated. A bright technical person is promoted to become a project manager, given some basic instruction in how to use a scheduling tool and generate financial reports and then thrown to the lions. The ones that possess a large amount of accountability and proactivity will pull success out of even this dreary picture but the lion eats by far the majority of people.

Is your project management selection process taking into account what makes a project manager successful? Or are you selecting good mechanics to become racecar drivers and then wondering why they keep crashing the car?

Are you spending the time to coach your people on how to be a leader? How to build power and influence over the stakeholders of a project and how to set goals that people buy into and get motivated about achieving? Are you teaching your project managers how to communicate effectively to all levels within your customer and your own company and how to build a relationship with the people that will help them get out of trouble when problems are encountered?

Are you doing all these things or are you just throwing your project managers to the lions and hope they know how to fight them off with a scheduling tool?

In 1999 Chris founded Aspen Consulting and proceeded to develop Aspen's unique style of delivering training. Based on the premise that people learn more by doing than by listening, Aspen's training method has been enthusiastically received by participants in Asia, Europe, and North America. Since Aspen's inception, Chris has led hundreds of participants to a new understanding of the Project Leadership role.

Before founding Aspen, Chris was involved in the development of the services marketplace at

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Chris holds a BSEE from Purdue University and his background is in IC design and development.

Aspen Consulting, Inc

Aspen Consulting is a leading provider of project leadership training for project managers. The methods used to delivery the training, in the form of turn-based gaming and simulations makes Aspen unique in the training industry.

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