

Anatomy of an Effective Project Manager

By Gary Hamilton, Gareth Byatt, and Jeff Hodgkinson

It's first thing in the morning, and you are preparing to interview prospective project managers for an open position on your team. Whether it is your first candidate interview or you have conducted many before in your career, you are likely to be contemplating the line of questioning you will ask of the prospective candidates. Perhaps you are thinking of questions from a "Strengths and Weaknesses: Project Manager Profile" that you typically use, however, any line of questioning can only provide a limited insight about the candidate and their potential to be an effective project manager for your organization.

Understand that a skilled candidate may well have sat through similar interviews recently, researched your organization, and prepared competent answers to what they believe are the most typical interview questions. Or maybe they haven't, because this is the first interview they are going to – although they are a first-rate project manager that is well thought of in their existing organization. In order to assess whether a person has the potential to be an effective project manager in your organization, we contend that you need to conduct specific assessments beyond interviews and references of previous work assignments.

There is no 'magic formula' for success in finding a project manager that transcends the needs of all organizations. A project manager who is highly successful in one organization or company may find limited success in another. Much may depend, for example, on how the organization sets itself up for running projects (strong matrix, weak matrix, projectized, or functional). Knowing how your own organization operates its projects is crucial to selecting new project management talent, and to make sure a new starter is not placed into a role where they will not realize their potential and the organization will not reap the maximum amount of benefit.

We believe there are certain personal characteristics/traits that, if present in a person, will make them more likely to be effective as a project manager in a variety of organizations. We broached this topic in our article; "Program & Project Manager Power – What are your most important traits to achieve success?" For this article we put forth what we believe are a set of core personal characteristics for project managers that, put together, can comprise a profile of an effective project manager for most organizations.

We put forward five core personal characteristics of effective project managers. These are:

- Be an extrovert
- Display personal courage (lead from the front)
- Possess charisma
- Be an enabler with a 'can do' attitude
- Have a strong sense of teamwork

Let's cover these points in more detail.

First, the need to be an extrovert. It is commonplace for project managers to give presentations and lead work groups – after all, a project manager's job is 90% communication. The audience for their presentations range from project teams to project sponsors and perhaps customers and/or investors. A project manager needs to be comfortable addressing any size of stakeholder and/or customer group in a wide variety of situations. An introverted person will likely have to undergo long-term training and coaching to "come out of their shell" in order to be truly effective in all environments. Extroverted people tend to exhibit a natural comfort in such situations and are at an advantage.

Next, the need to display personal courage. In many projects the project manager will need to settle disputes and difference of opinion amongst stakeholders.

Negotiations can often be delicate, particularly at tight moments in the project's life. The 'right decision' is usually not one that is favorable to all stakeholders. An effective project manager should display personal courage in all decisions made, to see them through and ensure the team continues to pull together for the benefit of the project. Maintaining respect from all stakeholders takes skill, which can be learned through experience.

This leads us to charisma. A charismatic project manager is more likely to have others willing and wanting to follow their lead because they have faith in their leadership. More than likely the charismatic project manager is in a better position to mentor and train others.

Neither of these two core characteristics of courage or charisma is present in the core personality traits of all people, and it is important to tease out how much of these characteristics the new candidates you are interviewing possess.

Having a consistent 'can do' attitude is akin to being positive at all times, and always seeing a solution to a challenge or a problem. Such an outlook can make a huge difference in the face of 'road blocks' when they appear. This positive attitude says a lot about the person's character and how they will react to adverse situations.

Have a strong sense of teamwork: An effective project manager while being results driven will also have a sense of team and enablement. He or she is focused on the team and the project over and above their individual needs. The project manager is continually encouraging the team to challenge themselves and to rise to heights that may even go beyond the expectations of the project (though not to 'gold plate' a solution, of course). To be effective, the project manager should consider their long-term relationships with the project team.




If he or she is totally results driven, without a sense of team and enablement, sure, their particular project may get done within the project constraints, but at what price, and what if they have another project with the same team member(s) in future? With a sense of team and enablement, a project manager is prone to be more effective in the long term. And people will want to work with them (even more so if they are charismatic and have a 'can do' attitude). If your organization preference is to focus on each project by project without regards for the long-term, bringing in someone who is focused on 'just getting the work done' would be the best option, but nowadays this type of approach is rarely pursued.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we assert that there are 5 particular personal characteristics that can make a person effective as a project manager – the need to be an extrovert, to display personal courage, to possess a measure of charisma, to have a 'can do' attitude and to be a good team worker. When these characteristics are present, along with core project management skills such as being a good organizer, being detail-oriented, and other 'discipline-orientated skills', the project manager is more likely to be effective across many types of organizations and industries.

Those who are making key hiring decisions for project management talent should consider appropriate assessments in addition to a person's experience and interviews in order to gain a complete picture of potential project managers. Taking the time to select the right people can pay huge dividends.

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