

# Project Competence: Organizational and Project Manager Roles

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## Introduction

Many case studies have been written on the failure of projects or their shortfall in delivering the agreed upon benefits. I don't recall reading a case study where everything went right with the resultant delivery of a perfect product to the customer. It appears that there are more partially successful projects than either failed projects or perfect projects.

While failed projects can teach us what not to do, it often gives a prescription for what to do to deliver the benefits. There are perhaps thousands of reasons for projects failing to meet expectations, but each of the reasons alone are perhaps only the symptoms of failure. To treat the symptoms does not get to the underlying causes of failure and the failures, or partially successful projects, continue.



Viewing the project from the bottom-up may not be the best approach to identifying the causes of failure. Taking a top-down view, that is, looking at the organizational environment the project operates in may be the right approach.

Many approaches to assessing a project's capability to perform, include reviewing the knowledge and experience of the project manager and the staff to determine adequacy and the tools that are used in managing the project. These reviews often identify project shortcomings. Seldom will the organizational environment be identified as a part of the problem. This assumes that the project functions as a stand-alone entity without external influences.

Rather than wait for failure to occur and suffering the consequences of such failure, it may be well to assess the organizational competence in performing

projects and then the competence of project managers and project staffs. Assessing competences will give a rating of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, which points to areas to improve. Competence is a continual goal that needs to be assessed repeatedly to identify areas for improvement.

## Organizational Competence in Project Management

Organizational competence in project management is a goal, that if achieved, gives projects the best chance for success. Organizational competence factors that contribute to project success range from project selection, project staffing, project support, project oversight and project design. In specific industries, there can be other factors as well.

- Selecting the right projects for the organization is a process that formally assesses the attributes of work to determine whether there is alignment with the strategic goals. Does the project work fit within the organization's core processes and is qualified staff available to implement the project? Is the project work a contributor to the business goals? Some other considerations are degree of risk, profit margin, relative size of the work, and technology requirements.
- Project staff considers the availability of project manager who has demonstrated competence in project work and possess the qualifications to perform efficiently and effectively. Other members of the project staff need to be qualified in the type of work anticipated and in the behavioral aspects that make them cooperative team members.
- Project support entails getting senior management's involvement to make timely decisions about project actions outside the authority of the project manager. This can also include such actions as assigning more or different staff members when the project needs a different team composition.

- Project oversight requires scheduling and conducting periodic reviews of progress to ensure the technical, schedule, and cost objectives are being achieved in a reasonable fashion, and that the project objectives are stable. Senior management of the organization needs to keep in touch with the progress of projects to ensure the projects are contributing to the organization's purpose.
- Project design entails constructing a project organization that is capable of performing the project's objectives within the established parameters. An understaffed or improperly skilled staffed project may not be able to meet the business objectives of the organization. An over-staffed project can lead to a lack of focus because the work is too finely divided among team members.

Organizational competence in project management may be viewed as senior management giving more attention to the selection, implementation, and tracking projects through structured activities that support business purpose and goals. The practice, policies, procedures, and activities associated with competence render value when the organization uses projects as building blocks to its success. Organizational competence is a concerted effort to align activities with project success.



### ***Project Manager's Competence***

Historically, project managers have been considered competent if they understood the triple parameters of cost, schedule, and technical performance. Project managers were selected based on their knowledge of cost principles and scheduling techniques while possessing a technical background that matched the project's technology. This role evolved to include more technical aspects of projects such as communication-information reporting, risk management, contract administration, and team development. Still, the project manager was only required to be knowledgeable in the identified areas – and not necessarily able to function satisfactorily.

Currently, the role of a project manager requires competence in project management, the demonstrated ability to perform, in three general areas – Technical, Contextual, and Behavioral.

These three areas, with elements as defined in the USA National Competence Baseline, encompass what is considered to be the general competence arena for modern project management.

- Technical competence for a project manager entails the ability to manage cost, schedule, and technical objectives through a series of planned actions and adjust the course of actions when there are circumstances that do not conform to the plan.
- Contextual competence for a project manager entails an understanding and ability to work within the project environment, which includes the parent organization or organizations that have project oversight.
- Behavioral competence for a project manager is exhibiting those social and attitudinal attributes that promote harmony within the project team and a smooth working relationship with project stakeholders.

The project manager sets the example of technical, contextual, and behavioral competence for the project team and serves as a role model for others to emulate. His or her behavior either positively or negatively affects the team. Some actual instances whereby the wrong behavior was exhibited follow.

- “Don't tell the customer that there is a problem with the data. Remember, we have a reputation to protect.” When the wrong information had been given to the customer and one person wanted to correct the error.
- “Don't lie to the customer. I repeat, I don't want any of you lying to the customer. That is my job and what I get paid for.” When the customer had been given the wrong information and attempts were made to correct the situation.
- “That was an honest mistake.” A comment made when one manager, known to be a prevaricator, told the truth.

A project manager, to be considered competent, must demonstrate contextual and behavioral competence in addition to being able to perform the technical aspects of projects.

The role of the project manager is to motivate the project team to perform at its best and achieve the project objectives (technical) through the use of leadership (behavioral) skills within the project environment (contextual).

### ***In Conclusion***

Organizations have a role in the project management process, primarily through senior management involvement and support with a system that facilitates projects. Competence is demonstrated by the actions taken within the organization to enhance project success or decisions that the project needs to be terminated early because of a lack of success indicators. Senior management's maintaining and tracking progress of projects through positive actions is an indicator of competence.

Project manager's role must embrace the three modes to be considered competent. Having a solid grasp of the technical aspect is not sufficient, but one has to understand and function within the contextual environment of the project while demonstrating the proper attitude and behavior. A project manager sets the standard for technical, contextual, and behavioral competence by his/her demonstrated actions.

Organizational and project manager roles are mutually supportive. When a competent project manager is charged with project work in a competent organization, there is the best chance for successful achievement of the project's objective. The same project in a less-than-competent organization challenges the competent project manager. Turning the situation around, the same project in a competent organization and less-than-competent project manager reduces the chance of a successful project.

It is concluded that the combination of roles of competent organizations and competent project managers provide the best chance of success. If one or both of the parties is less-than-competent, the probability for success will be random.

Therefore, organizations enhance their capabilities when they establish a path that leads to competence, both for the organization and their project managers.

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Lew Ireland is an Executive Project Management Consultant based in Tennessee and serving both US and international clients. He has worked with clients to establish their project management systems to ensure they are supportive of the organizations' respective goals. He is experienced in all phases of project management that include planning, scheduling, project office implementation, project maturity modeling, and project assessment.

Lew has authored or co-authored project management books and articles for professional journals. He is a continual contributor to the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management*, regularly writing short articles for our website.

Lew has a history of serving for nearly 25 years in volunteer positions to advance project management. He is past President and Chair of the Project Management Institute and has served in various positions within the Institute. He has been recognized by the Institute for his contributions by the Distinguished Contribution Award, Person of the Year, and elected a Fellow of the Institute.

He currently serves as President of the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management (asapm)*, a not-for-profit professional society dedicated to more effective project management practices.