

PSYCHOLOGY AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Human aspects of the project management



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Abstract

Project Management usually has a framework and methodologies which are being followed for successful project management. While the framework and methodology is vital for project management, the human aspect of the project management too has to be taken into consideration since this human aspect has an important role to play in the way the projects are managed. Projects are managed by individuals who are unique in themselves and hence each individual manages his or her project in his or her own unique way. A same project if given to two individuals will be managed in two different ways. This is because the psychological aspects of the individuals such as perception and emotions vary hugely and play a pivotal role in many processes like problem solving and decision making which affects the way the projects are handled in the real world. This aspect may sometimes result in the difference between success and failure of the project. This paper aims to study the relationship between the psychological aspects of the individuals and how it affects the way the projects are being handled by different individuals in the world of project management.

Introduction

Projects are Unique, so are Project Managers

The PMBOK defines a project as “A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result”. From this we can infer that each and every project is a unique one in that a particular endeavor is undertaken in creating a particular unique product, service or result which cannot be replicated. Though the project itself is unique there is common framework or methodology which helps the project managers manage the projects.

Similar to the uniqueness of the projects, the project managers who handle the projects are unique in themselves. A particular project if given to two different individuals, in all probability will be managed in two totally different ways, even though they follow the common framework. This is due to the inherent differences present in the individuals. Any project manager worth his salt will not be a stranger to the term “Troubled Projects”. The organization when met with a large trouble project invariably pulls in a successful project manager to assist the existing project manager to bail out the project or at least to bring back the project back on its tracks. In a few cases, the project might be handed over completely to another successful project manager who has a proven track record.

Now how does a project manager come in and bails out a troubled project which his counterpart is not able to? What makes one person achieve that even though both of them share the same common framework and share the same tools and techniques. One of the answers could be the difference in the amount of experience. But does experience alone make one successful in what he or she does? What makes one individual to be highly successful as a project manager while another can merely meet the required standards?

In many organizations there are a few project managers who are stars and other project managers’ look up to them. These star project managers

So this makes us clearly see that certain individuals are apt at handling projects in a more successful way than others.

While we say “successful project managers” it is to indicate that these people have a higher rate of success in managing their projects. It does not mean that they do not have failures, but their projects have a higher chance of attaining success.

Why some individuals are better at project management

To understand this, we would have to take a look at the psychological aspects of the individuals. Individuals vary based on various factors like their physiological aspects, biological factors etc., Based on this, their mental process is one of the main factors in which one individual varies from the other. To further understand this mental process and its study, we would have to seek the help of psychology.

Psychology per se is difficult to define in concrete terms as there are so many different definitions available. But all of them agree that psychology is a science, which deals with human behavior and mental processes.

One of the main focus areas of psychology is the study of mental processes. These involve mainly three factors which are:

- ❖ Cognition
- ❖ Emotion
- ❖ Motivation

Cognition: Cognition can be defined as a mental activity that involves perception, learning, memory, thought, belief, decision making and problem solving.

Emotion: Emotion is a subjective feeling that affects the individual and in turn is affected by our thoughts and behavior.

Motivation: In simple terms, motivation is the reason why people behave the way they do. It is the reason behind doing something and persisting with the function.

Everyone knows that to be a good project manager, one needs to be good at Leadership skills, have effective communication and problem solving skills, be a good negotiator and be able to influence others amongst others. But what are the factors that really make a difference? Is it the way they perceive things that is different from the others? Is it the way they handle stress that makes them more efficient?

Apart from their technical and project management skills, there are some traits that are present in these individuals. Talking to such individuals brought out one factor which stands out amongst these people. The main difference lies in one particular trait – Ability.

Ability arises from an individual's natural aptitude and subsequent learning opportunities. Ability differs from skill in that the skill can be learned based on the individual's ability. In order to perform efficiently, the individual must possess the necessary abilities.

Cognition and Ability :

Cognition is the set of the mental processes which encompasses learning, memory, problem solving, decision making etc. This is the seat of learning and perception. Cognitive abilities play a large part in how the individual processes the information available and then applies it in his or her daily life. The individual perceives the world through the available senses and process the information received through this.

One of the most important cognitive ability for a project manager is sequencing or prioritizing. In other words, it is the ability to prioritize.

Ability to prioritize:

This is one of the chief ability which stands out in any individual who is good at project management. This is an ability not to make simple lists of things to do and in the order that has to be done. The true power of this ability lies in the art of knowing when a task should be done and what needs to be done in order to accomplish that task. So a successful project manager always has a prioritized list at the back of this mind which is always ticking.

This ability comes in quite handy when dealing with team conflicts. Now there are many instances where in two teams get into an argument on how a particular task needs to be done. Team A would advocate their preferred method while Team B would feel that their method is more suited to the task at hand. The project manager's job here is not to take a decision but help both teams come to an amicable agreement so that the task gets completed in the most efficient manner. So while both teams support their methods and highlight their advantage, the project manager starts to ask questions which revolve around his priorities. By doing this, the project manager is able to remove unwanted points from the discussion and help the team focus on the real issues and come to an agreement.

Ability to learn :

This is one of the most underrated abilities in a project manager's life. The most common misunderstanding is that a project manager need not understand the technicalities of the project. It is assumed that the project manager just manages the schedule and budget and since the plan is prepared with the help of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) or Technical Architects, the project manager need not be technically savvy.

In real life, the project manager needs to understand at least the basic fundamentals of the stream in which he or she functions. If it is IT infrastructure, the project manager needs to be conversant with the technical terms being used in this field and the way things are run over here. The IT infrastructure world is different from say, the construction environment. Even in IT, the infrastructure environment varies greatly from the software development arena.

The project manager must have the ability to assimilate what is being planned – at least at a larger level. To achieve this he must have the ability to learn on the job. Every project is unique and different and every project brings with it a new learning curve. The project manager must be very adept at learning so that he or she can understand the process. This in turn helps them greatly when getting things done.

This ability has a great big advantage. A project manager who learns and understands the technical part of his project is always in a better position to deal with problem solving. Though the project manager can seek the help of qualified SMEs, the ultimate responsibility of dealing with problems lies with the project manager and this is where this ability comes to the fore.

Emotion and Ability:

Emotion is a subjective feeling that affects the individual. Cognition also plays an important role in emotions in that it is based upon the interpretations that an individual reacts. For example, when the individual perceives an imminent danger and that is interpreted by his cognitive abilities as a threat, then the feeling of fear that the individual fears is emotion. As per Robert Plutchik, there are eight primary or basic emotions - anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation (interest), trust (acceptance), and joy.

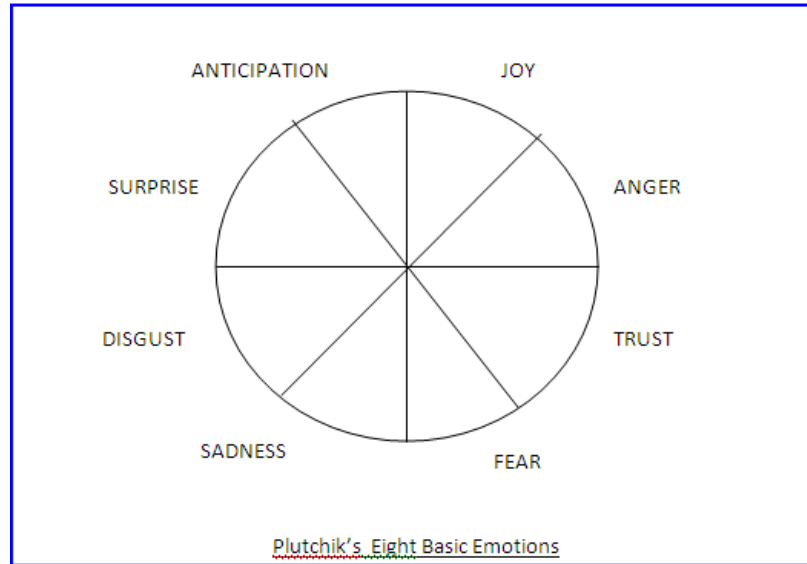


Figure 1 : Plutchik's Eight Basic Emotion

Ability to maintain a positive attitude:

Emotion also plays an important role in one of the recent developments, positive psychology. Positive psychology is a young branch of psychology which aims to help individuals lead a more fulfilling life. This branch of psychology is based on the individual's emotions on how to react towards a particular situation or stimuli.

There are individuals who are more positive in their attitude and who take things in their stride and march on even when faced with adversity and there are individuals who lose heart and do not have the strength to carry on even when faced with a minor setback. The ability to take things in stride and accept it and then decide on what can be done to either rectify it or to make things better is the positive attitude. In other words, instead of asking "Why me", the positive individual starts asking "What next" whereas the not so positive individual is more focused the "Why me" stage and gets depressed.

In the world of project management, changes are a way of life and the project manager should be ready to deal with all sorts of changes. There might be sudden changes in the scopes midway or there might be unexpected cut in the budget. These sorts of things do happen and this is where the positive attitude of the project manager comes into play. These sorts of changes cause a lot of disappointment to the team members and if the project manager too gets disappointed and expresses it, the project gets affected. So it is the duty of the project manager to maintain a positive attitude and ensure that the team does not lose its spirit and continues to operate at an optimum level of performance.

Ability to handle stress successfully:

Stress is a term very commonly used and has got a lot of definitions ranging from the great confusion of mind" to a mental strain. But one thing is sure, that stress affects the way the individual performs. Stress in a mental activity that has the capacity to impair other cognitive processes. Hans Seyle, who had worked extensively in this field, named two variants of stress – Eustress and Distress.

When an individual sees the stress as a challenge which inspires him to perform much better or by working in a challenging environment, it might be called as Eustress. On the other hand, when an individual sees stress as a threat that makes him or her withdraw or retreat whereby affecting his performance negatively, that might be called as Distress. Prolonged distress might lead to depression.

In project management, there are deadlines and milestones to be met, budgets to be kept under control, unexpected surprises by the way of resource constraint or lack of skilled resource pool – all these contribute to stress. It is natural for any individual to feel the stress under these circumstances. The individual who sees these as challenges to be overcome and works towards it, handles stress more successfully than the individual who sees these as threats.

When a project manager sees the stress as Eustress and behaves accordingly, it inspires confidence in the team members and makes them believe in the project manager's capabilities. On the other hand, if a project manager gets distressed, it pulls the team down thereby affecting the overall confidence and efficiency. So the project manager who handles stress successfully makes stable decisions and has a confident project team who can deliver under stressful conditions.

Motivation and Ability:

Motivation simply put, is a desire to do. It is used to explain why a particular person does something. It is what makes one wake up on a Monday morning and go to work. It is the initiating force which makes one act the way they act. Motivation is a goal-oriented phenomena.

Ability to motivate people:

This is one of the most important abilities which can often be the difference between success and failure. Motivation is not about pushing people to achieve their goals. It is about inspiring them, making them want to do their tasks, to make everyone feel that they are a valuable part of the team and move towards a common goal. Motivation by way of recognition is a great way of making people feel motivated. Everyone yearns for recognitions and it helps boost their self esteem and thereby results in much better performance.

A study conducted by the Florida State University in March 2007 to understand how motivation works from the project manager's perspective states that one of the main reasons for a low level of motivation amongst the team members is "the project manager's inability to keep team motivation up". The majority of the respondents (79%) believed that it is the responsibility of the project manager to stir up the motivation at the beginning of the project.

In the same study, when asked if a project manager can motivate a project team even if the overall organizational culture has a negative effect on employee motivation, almost half of the respondents (43%), agreed and said yes. So this study reveals that the role of a project manager as a motivator is very vital for the overall success rate of the project. So a project team which is well motivated by the project manager can achieve more and meet tight deadlines more often than a de-motivated project team.

The abilities identified based on the cognitive, emotional and motivational aspects are as below:

- ❖ Ability to prioritize
- ❖ Ability to learn quickly
- ❖ Ability to maintain a positive attitude
- ❖ Ability to handle stress successfully
- ❖ Ability to motivate people

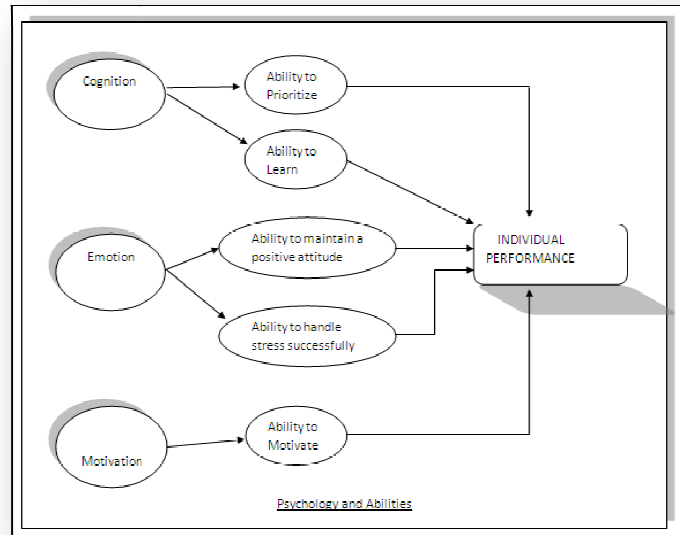


Figure 2: Ability to motive people.

Difference in the abilities between project managers

To find out how much importance is given to the above abilities by the project managers and how it reflects on the majority of the outcome of their projects, a simple survey was conducted amongst a small sample of project managers. The sample was drawn from the available pool of project managers handling IT infrastructure projects.

The first group consisted of project managers who had a track record of completing at least three (60%) of their last five projects on time, within the stipulated budget and had a successful closure. These project managers did not let their projects slip into RED and if it did, they had to capability to put it back on track without seeking external help.

The second group consisted of project managers whose track records were below 60%. Most of their projects failed to meet any one of the triple constraints and whenever their project went to RED, these project managers were not able to put the project back on track and had the habit of seeking the help of other project manager to help them out.

The average experience of these project managers was around six years in project management.

The factors that were taken up for rating are as follows:

1. Ability to prioritize – How important is this ability from the perspective of resolving team conflicts and problem solving?
2. Ability to motivate people – How important is this ability in inspiring people and helping them achieve their goals?
3. Ability to maintain a positive attitude – How important is this ability in seeing issues and handling unexpected changes?

4. Ability to handle stress successfully – How important is to feel eustressed when faced with sudden change in the triple constraint?
5. Ability to learn quickly – How important is this ability for a project manager to resolve problems?

All of the project managers were asked to rate the importance of the above ability to the project manager and also from the view how each one of them is important to the success of the project. It was not necessary that they possess these skills in that order, but how they perceive the importance of each ability based on the importance it brings to the project management and the outcome of the project. They were asked to rate on a scale of one to five, five being the most important.

SI No	Description	Rank
1	MOST IMPORTANT	5
2	IMPORTANT	4
3	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	3
4	VERY LOW IMPORTANCE	2
5	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	1

It has to be borne in mind that the survey conducted was in no means elaborate and did not involve project managers from across organizations and fields. This is an initial attempt to probe into the psychological aspects and how they related to the field of project management and project managers.

Based on the ability factor, it is possible to a certain extent to identify people who would be naturally good at project management. If the abilities factor can be assessed for the individual it can give us a clearer picture of the individual’s traits and thus a glimpse into his project management capabilities.

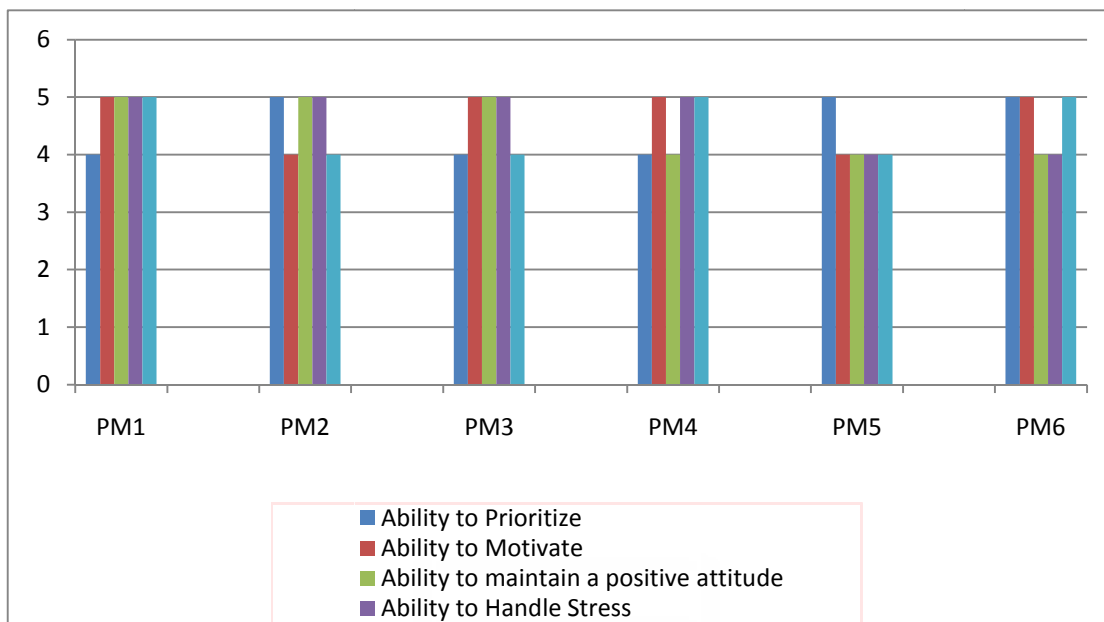


Figure 3: Results obtained from the First group.

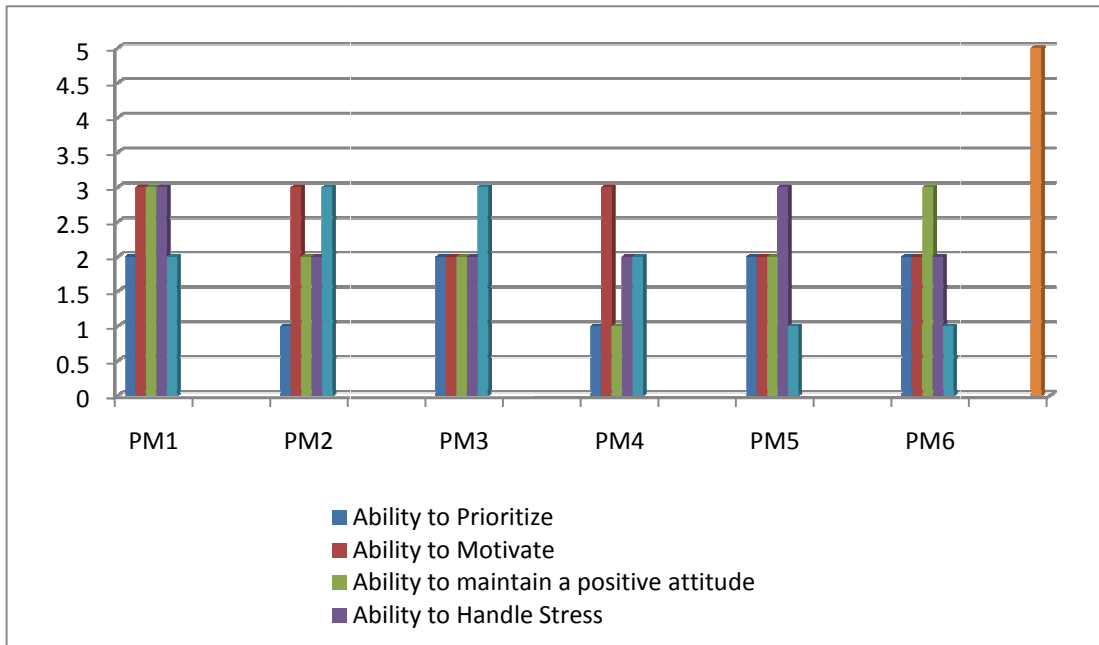


Figure 4: Results obtained from the Second group

As can be seen from the results, the first group which consists of project managers who had to most success, gave high importance to all these abilities with most of the abilities getting a high rank of five.

The second group which consists of project managers with a not so high success rate, did not feel that high importance should be given to these abilities. These individuals felt that these abilities were not a must have or important enough to have an effect on the outcome of the projects.

It must be borne in mind that it was not necessary that these individual possess the mentioned abilities but the way they perceive the importance of these abilities in the mentioned context and the importance they have on the outcome of the projects. So it can be seen from the outset that the way the projects are managed vary greatly due to the variance in the perception of the individuals. An individual might see a risk as an threat while another individual perceives it as an opportunity to achieve. This difference in perception leads to the difference in the way the individual manages the team and the project and this in turn leads to different results.

This supports the fact that the project managers who have a high success rate approach their projects and project management in an entirely different manner from those who are more prone to failure. These successful project managers know that they are the leaders and they can inspire their team to achieve greater heights. They also view the unplanned exigencies as challenges and not as threats. They also display a positive attitude frame of mind. This helps them in attacking the issues at hand with a clear cut plan in mind. Since they do not experience distress they rise up to the occasion and display a positive attitude which is contagious. This in turn sends a strong signal to the project team that they have a leader who leads and the team members are inspired and they look up the project manager as their leader. This helps bond team spirit and results in team cohesiveness which translates into better productivity.