

Selecting and Growing Project Managers

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The characteristics and mind-set of Technical Specialists generally may influence the ability of a star specialist to become an effective Project Manager.

Many business environments that are beginning to mature in their business management practices and procedures go through a cycle of determining who to select as their Project Managers and how to grow their competence and capability. As a certified Project Management Professional who has been a practicing Project Manager for the last 20 years, and instructing over 15,000 participants in the profession of Project Management worldwide for the Project Management Institute, InfoComm, and my own training company, I have seen many cycles occur through many different business markets. These would include, most notably, the Information Technology environment, but also the audiovisual installation and integration industry, financial services, construction (especially smaller firms), and companies who are attempting to undergo process improvement efforts primarily using their internal resources to manage and staff the project.

Typically companies begin to unconsciously grow their future Project Managers through the “trial by fire” approach of crisis management, or fire-fighting. They give an intelligent, highly motivated technical or functional employee a “challenge” or “opportunity” to fix a problem within a very limited time with very constrained resources. This opportunity is viewed as an emergency, and the company (or manager) is depending on them to give “110%”, “pull out all the stops”, “do whatever it takes”, etc. to get the crisis contained. (To paraphrase an oft-quoted phrase – “a crisis is the instantaneous end of a delusion.”)

There are difficulties with this approach of attempting to transform their star problem solver into a Project Manager – much of them stemming from the mind-set of a Technical Specialist, who have a general tendency to look within themselves in order to arrive at the desired solution. Let’s put the list of the traits side by side and then discuss each.

Technical Specialist	Project Manager
Seeks Optimal Solutions	Seeks Pragmatic Solutions
Strives for Precision	Strives for Accuracy
Deals with Things	Deals with People
Focuses on Processes	Focuses on Outcomes
Reactionary Problem Solving	Proactive Planning
Works with Immutable Laws	Works with Situational Rules
Specializes to Improve	Generalizes to Improve
Succeeds Individually	Succeeds through Others
<i>Answer-Based</i>	<i>Question-Based</i>

Let’s go through each in more detail.

A Technical Specialist:

Seeks Optimal Solutions – there is a best answer and they usually make every effort to attain it – and often get demoralized when they are unable to realize that optimum.

Strives for Precision – they look for exactness, and when they can’t give an exact answer, tend to feel as if their competence or knowledge is being judged. Estimates tend to be presented as very exact and often are often based on optimistic (perfect world) conditions.

Deals with Things – machines, speakers, equipment, wiring, racks, etc. If an individual understands the inner workings of something – one can fix it or make it work. Things tend to not have the ability to talk back, nor do they have an opinion which may cause conflict – which is seen as a condition to be avoided or minimized.

Focuses on Processes – there is a prescribed way of getting things done, in an often systematic and very linear process – following the steps will lead to the optimal solution.

Reactionary Problem Solving – putting out fires is a challenge – an opportunity to show one's expertise and knowledge – the bigger the crisis – the more indispensable the person. Only escalates when the problem has grown to insurmountable proportions.

Works with Immutable Laws – there are certain laws of nature which make sense and must be applied – physics, electrical, mechanical, etc. – a problem can be solved using these scientific principles.

Specializes to Improve – gets better by becoming more and more knowledgeable about specific interest areas – being the expert in a field is the highest compliment.

Succeeds Individually – mostly focuses on diving individually into challenge or opportunity – removing oneself from the surroundings – and focusing all the effort into the specific problem.

Answer-Based – sees their value and worth being measured by how well, how quickly, and how precisely one can answer a question. Asking a question only shows others that one doesn't know or can't determine the answer.

In contrast, a mature Project Manager looks outside of themselves for resources and asks probing questions of others to achieve the desired outcome.

A Project Manager:

Seeks Pragmatic Solutions – defines what is probable and realistic given the circumstances, assumptions and constraints – communicates realism, not optimal.

Strives for Accuracy – an accurate estimate always has a confidence range, or a probability factor – a precise estimate is typically completely inaccurate – is uncomfortable with the unknowns and variances of projects.

Deals with People – most projects impact a range of different people – all of whom have opinions, needs, wants and expectations – which are often conflicting. A Project Manager learns to address conflict early and understands that conflict is a natural part of a project.

Focuses on Outcomes – able to envision the desired results and looks across multiple ways to achieve that result. Has more of a deliverable focus than process focus.

Proactive Planning – strives to minimize the occurrence of risks and fires through the application of proactive planning – when problems do occur a PM will notify others as the problem is being worked on – escalates early with options.

Works with Situational Rules – understands that the world is not perfect and is willing to adapt to the current situation and make changes due to fluctuating conditions. Communicates what is occurring vs. what is hoped for.

Generalizes to Improve – attempts to understand the bigger picture and the inter-relationships between the various pieces and people involved in and being affected by the project. Focuses on the integration of different specialties and the hand-offs between them.

Succeeds through Others - relies on the expertise of others instead of personally having to know all of the answers – understands that projects are successful through the combined efforts of many different people working together.

Question-Based – understands the value of asking questions – especially those which are too simple to often have been asked – involves many different stakeholders – is willing to not know the answers in order to find the correct solution.

Both of these are incredibly important to the successful completion of a project and the satisfaction of a Client. The challenge is in determining which of your resources are predisposed to staying a Technical Specialist and which are more inclined to become Project Managers. The biggest challenge is in breaking the habit of trying to have all people be all things – ultimately diminishing their strengths and reducing their value.

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