

Project Manager: The Competent Professional

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Introduction

Assessing a project manager's competence too often is a subjective process that bears little resemblance to actual organizational needs. The shortfall in guidelines and standards for a project manager's performance limits any objective assessment.

Competence in professional disciplines is receiving more attention in literature and more interest in the organizations. In the past, job knowledge alone achieved by experience or training in specific areas has been viewed as the same thing as competence and the key to productivity. Similarly, project management knowledge of itself is also often equated with project management competence. If this is true, why then are there still so many project failures despite significant advances in project knowledge over the past 20 years? It must be because project management knowledge alone is *not* competence.

Knowledge is power. Sir Francis Bacon late 16th Century

Competence is power plus. Lew Ireland, 2004

What is competence?

A competent professional is generally understood to be someone who "can do the job." This leads to many unanswered questions. What does "do the job" mean in terms of the efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity? What standards are used to gauge the completion of the work? Who measures the success of a project " is it an independent person using consistent standards, a person with motive to see success or failure, or the individual performing the job?

We can use two desktop references to add precision to the general idea of being competent. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as: "1. Properly or well qualified; sufficient" and "2. Adequate for the purpose." And, *The Readers Digest Family Word Finder* has these synonyms for competence: ability, ableness, capability, competency, proficiency, skill, expertness, mastery, and expertise. In both cases, notice that "knowledge" is not synonymous with "competence." "Knowledge" is an inherent part of adequacy, ability, mastery, and other descriptive words, but it is not equivalent to "competence." Further, notice that our questions about efficiency, standards, and measurement are still not answered.

Some questions may be answered by first examining the opposite of competence, or *incompetence*. Often times a person may be labeled *incompetent* because of personal attributes that are seen as undesirable in society. Comments such as "not the sharpest knife in the drawer," "not the brightest light in the chandelier," "possesses viscous intellect," and

"has delusions of adequacy" are assessments made on a personal basis and typically not to any objective job standard. Sadly, a person is often called *incompetent* for failing to meet a single subjective criterion versus being labeled *competent* for meeting a collection of standards for job performance.

True competence is measured from consistently applied objective standards for job performance in an organization.

Neither competence nor incompetence should be subjectively or arbitrarily assigned. The assessment must relate to objective standards or guidelines that a person meets or fails to meet. These standards must be consistently applied to gauge the level of competence. Competence in a profession is consistently meeting the objective criteria for performance on the job.

Competence in Project Management

What then is project management competence? What are the knowledge, skills, and attitude that project managers must possess. It is generally agreed that the overall scope of competence covers these three areas.

- **Knowledge** consists of the general and specific project management theory, concepts, practices, procedures, processes, and methodologies that apply to an industry and the complexity of projects being conducted. The project manager must first possess knowledge of the technical aspects of the industry to an extent that he or she understands the product and service being built and delivered. The business aspects are typically described in project management literature that address schedule, cost, risk, and other functions that relate to the overall management of a project.
- **Skills** are the application of knowledge to project work that ensures accomplishment of the work in an effective and efficient manner. The skill functions are those defined by the industry, project size, project complexity, and organizational perspective for projects. A project manager may not possess all the detailed skills for the project, but may rely on others to perform designated tasks.
- **Attitude** is the personal and professional demeanor exhibited by a person while performing his or her work. In the context of *competence*, this would be a positive outlook and an ability to not take one's self too seriously. Attitude includes drive, energy, good instincts, and dedication. A project manager must demonstrate the correct attitude when working with all the project stakeholders, e.g., project team, senior management, customer, and special interest groups.

Setting Standards for Project Management Competence.

To demonstrate the full range of project management competence, one should be able to show a capability to perform the functions required to design, develop, and deliver the project's product or service to the client. Achieving this level of competency takes time, effort, and experience, as well as must account for the basics as well as industry uniqueness. This makes setting standards for project management competence difficult,

but not impossible.

A first step is to recognize that there can be several levels of expertise. The project manager is viewed as the primary leader and motivator to orchestrate the project activities. A project planner and scheduler, a cost analyst, an engineer, and a coordinator would perform many of the functions within the project. Someone who performs all these jobs has a different level of competence than someone who only does one or two of the specific functions. Similarly, each job level should have its specific standards for knowledge, skills, and attitude to define competence.

Gaining Knowledge

In terms of knowledge at the highest level of competence, the competent project manager demonstrates full knowledge of the project management discipline, which encompasses the full range of project operations from initial conceptual consideration of an idea through closeout of the project. This knowledge must be contemporary and accepted within the project management community.

Project management standards form part of the knowledge base in addition to providing statements of "what should be done," "to what degree of precision," and "how it should be accomplished." In the United States, the trend is for professional associations to develop standards that apply to the discipline and then the government will often adopt them for use. Conversely, some countries develop standards within the governmental structure, which are adopted by the profession. In either case, this is not to say that the professionals of the disciplines do not participate in the development process. One of the major contributions to the discipline is a common language, or vocabulary, to promote understanding of the discipline's activities.

Project management literature also plays a key role in establishing a knowledge base of practice, procedures, and techniques that project managers should know. With more than 500 project management or project management-related books published each year, literature, unlike standards, does not follow a given format to establish a scope for the subject matter or even a consistent vocabulary. This is one reason why a knowledge standard cannot be established from literature alone, and why a person needs more than general knowledge obtained through literature. One must have the right skills and attitude to accompany knowledge.

Becoming Skilled

Project Management Skills are those mental and physical capabilities that are employed to integrate and synthesize knowledge into a contextual form. Skills give the project manager the ability to place into action the knowledge of the discipline. The skills may be obtained from two different sources, i.e., experience and simulation. To assess whether skills meet objective standard, one may evaluate experience or simulation, or both.

Experience is an excellent teacher that requires a significant amount of time and being in the right place at the right time. Today, coaching and mentoring are common ways of gaining experience, allowing an individual to work in a position that he or she has not previously served. The coach or mentor guides the individual through difficult situations

to minimize the adverse effect of wrong decisions.

Simulation in project management is a means of compressing the time required to obtain experience. Effective simulation can replicate many different scenarios that are near representations of actual project work. Individuals may make errors that are not costly and have no negative impact on a critical project of the organization. Individuals learn skills through making errors and exercising their capabilities.

Having the Right Attitude

Attitude is perhaps the least-considered attribute of a project manager, and wrongly so. An observation is that project management consultants get hired for their technical knowledge and skills, but fired for their lack of interpersonal skills. Often there is an attitude of "technical arrogance" attributed to the consultant when the consultant is placing too much emphasis on technical skills and no emphasis on the relationship.

A truly competent project manager has a professional attitude that shows commitment to the mission of the project without being abrasive or denigrating. Treating individuals with respect and dignity while building on a trusting relationship that is supportive of getting the work accomplished. One should always work on a better relationship tomorrow than there is today. Those better relationships must extend to all stakeholders such as team members, clients, contractors, and others involved with the project.

Personal attitude is maintaining the appropriate demeanor at all times. Inappropriate comments about others should always be avoided in any group. This is not to say that an individual must be a friend to everyone or give the appearance of such. Treating others with dignity and respect as colleagues is the right attitude.

Competence: Will You Know It When You See It?

Competence is directly related to the role that a project manager is expected to serve and how well the expectations are met. Currently, there are few standards for a project manager and in some organizations there is no role description. Many times, the project manager's performance is assessed in the organization based on the outcome of the project rather than by objective standards of how the project was managed in the context of roles and resources.

Assessing a project manager's competency too often is a subjective process that bears little resemblance to actual organizational needs. The shortfall in guidelines and standards for a project manager prevents any objective assessment.

One example of subjective performance ratings was in an organization that expected the project manager to function with limited resources. A series of project managers failed to meet the desired results and were ultimately replaced by a "hotshot" project manager, who had something the others did not -- the full support of the organization's president. Once project failure was recognized, the president would assign the "hotshot" project manager to the recovery - giving him all the resources necessary to "save the project" from complete failure.

In this example, project managers given inadequate resources and little senior management support were considered failures - or incompetent within their profession. No one will ever know whether they were competent project managers burdened with a project that was improperly staffed or they failed through lack of knowledge, skills, and attitude. Just as important, did the hotshot project manager succeed because he had unlimited resources and full senior management support or because he was fully competent?

Certification of Competent Project Managers

A certificate of competency no more guarantees successful accomplishment of a project than a medical degree can guarantee successful surgery. But like a degree, a certificate of competency can increase one's confidence and trust that selected professional standards are being followed. If it is expected that accountants, lawyers, teachers and healthcare specialists are certified for competency, then why not project managers who have responsibilities for projects that cost trillions of dollars each year.

The International Project Management Association (IPMA), through its Member Associations, has been certifying project manager's competency for many years. These certifications assess knowledge, skills, and attitude at various levels of expertise with consideration for national, industry, and organizational needs. Well-recognized globally, this multi-level certification program is being brought to the United States through *asapm*®.

The American Society for the Advancement of Project Management is developing a certification program, known as *PMCert*®, that recognizes the importance of competence in project management. It will be the first U.S. project management certification that grants competency certification for project management knowledge, skills, and attitude. It is a certification that raises the bar of professionalism for all project managers.

Summary

For a project manager to be considered competent, he/she must meet the objective standards of the profession and be able to perform all the duties associated with managing the project. This includes knowledge, skills, and attitude directly related to the project as well as having some knowledge and skills in the general area of management. The project manager must demonstrate his/her competence through on-the-job performance as validated by an independent assessment of qualifications.

Project Management Competence certification is coming to the U.S. to meet national and organizational needs while validating candidate's credentials. The American Society for the Advancement of Project Management will soon provide this service to individuals to demonstrate that the project management profession is maturing.

Additional Information

Readers may wish to consult the sources below to enhance their understanding of competence and how it supports project management.

Cleland, David I. and Lewis R. Ireland, *Project Manager's Portable Handbook*, 2nd Ed.,

(2004), McGraw-Hill, NY, NY, p. 17.

Lucia, Anntoinette D. and Richard Lepsinger, *The Art and Science of Competency Models*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 1999, 197 pages

Palus, Charles J. and David M. Horth, *The Leader's Edge*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2002, 277 pages

Quinn, Robert E., Sue R. Faerman, Michael P. Thompson, and Michael R. McGrath, *Becoming a Master Manager: A competency framework*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003, 382 pages

The Value of Project Management Certification at www.asapm.org. An article discussing the worth of certification in project management.

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