

Applying General Wisdom to Project Management *Psychology is Crucial to Project Management*

Sometimes, I get so caught up in the principles and practices of project management that I forget that project management is essentially a group of practices that involve skills that are also employed in the general business world. While communication, motivation, and problem solving are key elements of the project management environment, they are not exclusive to that environment.

My personal library is stocked with books that provide remarkably useful insights that can be applied to project management, even though these texts were not aimed at a project management audience. In fact, at least one of these books addresses skills that parents can use with children – skills that are equally applicable to project management.

This paper provides a sampling of this published wisdom, as it can be applied to the sphere of project management.

Praise and Criticism

Let's start with the parent/child skills that I mentioned above. As project managers or team leaders, we are often faced with the need to either praise or criticize someone. Praise and criticism are an essential part of leading. Good works should be noticed. Errors or poor performance should be corrected. We want to motivate good performance and discourage the bad stuff.

Haim G. Ginott, in his classic work of 1965, *“Between Parent and Child”* urges us to praise or criticize the deed, rather than the person. Say, “What you just did was bad”, rather than, “You are a bad person”. When you are tempted to blast someone who has repeatedly goofed up, you don't want to say, “You are just the biggest screw-up on the team”, even if it is true. This doesn't accomplish anything. Instead, try “Hey, that's the third time that you've had a problem with this. Is there something that I can help you with so you don't have such trouble with it?” We can express our angry feelings provided we do not attack a person's personality or character.

Ginott tells us to never say that someone is “good” or “bad”. Rather, we should say that what they did was a good thing or a bad thing. Doesn't this make sense? Are any of us totally good or totally bad? Do any of us always excel or always screw-up?

So even when a good performer really comes through for you, praise the accomplishment. This leaves room for additional praise when that person comes up with a winner again and again. After all, how many times can you say, “You're really the greatest” before it wears off?

It must be even more apparent that criticizing the person, rather than the deed, is demoralizing and destructive. If you say that a person is useless enough times the person will eventually perform so as to live up to your description and low expectations. Here's another piece of wisdom about praise and criticism. Praise in public. Criticize in private.

Problem Solving

Another skill that we really need from our project managers is “problem solving”. Assuming that “Murphy” is working on your project (What can go wrong will go wrong), the ability to analyze and resolve problems is essential to project success. While we cannot expect the project manager or team leader to solve all problems, that key individual must make sure that a good problem solving procedure is in place and that the process of problem solving is structured, communicated, and managed.

One thing that will help in this regard is to implement an **issue/incident tracking system** within the larger project management system. In this way, the issues are recorded, assigned to an owner, communicated to other stakeholders, and tracked through to their resolution.

For guidance on problem solving and decision-making, I again refer to a 1965 publication. This one is “*The Rational Manager*”, by Charles H. Kepner and Benjamin B. Tregoe. The authors present a structured, rational method for resolving problems and arriving at corrective decisions.

Step one is to recognize the problem. How do we know that there is a problem? We must have an expectation, a measurement, and the recognition of a deviation. For those of us that develop and track plans with a project management software system, the issue of recognizing schedule and cost deviations is easily dealt with. Using the Earned Value Analysis capabilities built into these systems will promptly disclose excessive schedule and cost variations. Technical issues are not so easily disclosed, but monitoring practices should be put in place. Quality issues should be disclosed via the firm’s standard quality assurance practices.

The next step is to determine the cause of the problem. Kepner & Tregoe note that it is often difficult to isolate the cause. In order to test for what is a possible cause and what is not a cause, they suggest that we ask a very simple and key question: “What has changed?”

This is one of my favorite problem solving techniques. If a process has been working and suddenly it is not, I stop and ask, “What has changed?” For instance, the welds had been going well, passing all quality tests. Suddenly, two out of three welds are failing. What has changed? Has there been a procedure change? A personnel change? A material change? An environmental change? Isolating the cause is a key step in resolving the problem.

After finding the cause, we go on to generate alternative corrective actions. We evaluate the proposed remedies and test for possible adverse consequences. This leads to a decision and the taking of corrective action.

Here’s a trap to avoid in addressing problems and implementing solutions. Never fail to involve all possible stakeholders in the solution decision. For instance, correcting a mechanical interference without consulting with the design engineer can lead to solutions that actually make the problem worse. This I know from personal experience.

Motivation and the Psychological Contract

In the introduction to her critically acclaimed book "The Change Masters", Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in visiting with corporate executives across America, says *"I have been struck by an ever-louder echo of the same question: how to stimulate more innovation, enterprise, and initiative from their people."*

What has changed drastically, in the past couple of decades is the unwillingness of newer people in the workforce to blindly accept leadership solely on the basis of placement in the hierarchy. This new breed of worker tends to respect knowledge power over position power. This has had an extreme effect on the traditional system of rewards and punishments.

Once more, I go back to 1965, when Edgar H. Schein wrote: *"an organization has within it many groups which generate their own norms of what is right and proper behavior, and that such norms extend to the amount and type of work to be performed."* Today, that is more applicable than ever. Schein continues: *"the organization is a complex social system which must be studied as a total system if individual behavior within it is to be totally understood."*

The questions that Schein raises are not unlike those of Rosabeth Moss Kanter. "How can an internal environment be created for members of the organization which will enable them to grow in their own unique capacities?" "How can organizations be designed to create optimum relationships between various subgroups which tend to develop within them?"

Schein's answer to this was the "Psychological Contract". Before we get to a description of the Psychological Contract concept, let's explore some common theories about human behavior in the organization. While we cannot apply these theories to everyone in the workforce, we hold these attributes to be characteristic of today's psychologically healthy and productive individuals.

- ❑ These people have an inherent need to use their capacities and skills in a mature and productive way.
- ❑ They seek to make their work more interesting, challenging, and meaningful.
- ❑ They thirst for a sense of pride and self-esteem.

The Psychological Contract

According to Schein, for these individuals to achieve these goals in the workplace, and to obtain satisfaction from their work, depends to a large measure on two conditions.

- ❑ First, is the degree in which their own expectations of what the organization will provide them and what they owe the organization, match what the organization's expectations are of what it will give and get.
- ❑ Second (assuming that there is an agreement on expectations) is what is actually exchanged -- money in exchange for time at work; social-need satisfaction and security in exchange for work and loyalty; opportunities for self-actualization and challenging work in exchange for high productivity, quality work, and creative effort in the service of

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organizational goals; or various combinations of these and other things.

Several of the paragraphs in this section have been taken from my two-part article on the Psychological Contract, published previously on this website (and in my book, "Practical Project Management"). Due to space limitations, we refer you to the previously published works for more on this topic.

The 1965 Legacy

The working environment issues, addressed by Kanter and Schein, are especially critical in the project management arena. The use of matrix organizations and temporary project teams to work on projects only intensifies the conditions that they address. The Schein solution, while developed to deal with the general working condition, is easily applicable to the project situation.

Likewise, the 1965 publications by Ginott, and Kepner & Tregoe, also provide remedies that would serve the project management community well, almost four decades later.

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