The Three P's of Project Management

By William Thom

Project managers are people managers. Many of us have heard this over the years, but is that it? Are we nothing more than people managers? I will agree that we are responsible for managing people and that this is a portion of the PM (Project Manager) role. I ask that we take a moment to look at a couple of facts. Many PM's get certification from the PMI (Project Management Institute) which is ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) recognised certification. Additionally, one could also receive a Masters Degree in Project Management. With that in mind, are PM's really nothing more than people managers? Is there really a perception that PM's do nothing more than manage people? Is people management the most important function of a PM?

In this article I want to present the three P's of project management. The three P's are to take into account the elements and structure of project management. As most of us know, there are five project management process groups and nine knowledge areas (please refer to the PMBOK guide for clarification). I can assure you that there is more than people management when it comes to the process groups and knowledge areas. On the other hand, without people and without people management projects can not be accomplished. So people management is important, but without the other two P's will a project be successful? Let me present the three P's of Project Management and follow them with a review:

1. People Management
2. Process Management
3. Performance Management

People Management is essential in regards to project management. It takes the leadership of the project manager to guide a team towards working together in symmetry to accomplish the objectives of a project. I feel that co-operation and collaboration are a couple of key ingredients when it comes to people management. Without co-operation and/or collaboration by the team or an individual on the team, a project can end up in jeopardy.

How do you build a team that fosters collaboration and co-operation? I have found that the best decisions are made by a team not an individual. Early on in a project I bring the team together to discuss the objectives of the project. Then to engage the subject matter experts and the IT resources in a discussion that elicits the best decisions. I ask questions and encourage the team to do the same. Next we look at making a decision. I follow this up by looking for options or alternatives by asking if there is a better way. The information presented here leads to new and better decisions. The best decisions are made. The best information will be presented and individuals will be contributors.

It is common for any team to go through forming, norming, storming and conforming in order to grow. The PM expects this and is prepared to manage it accordingly so the team performs. It is persuasive assertiveness that, when used effectively, leads the team in overcoming differences and strives for project success.

To this point we have only discussed people management, and frankly, teams can be organised for all sorts of reasons and the team leader can use the information above to leverage the team. Is people management another term for project management?

Process management is equally important to people management. Without either of these, the ability to provide a successful project outcome is severely diminished. To improve the outcome of
a project the PM utilises sound and repeatable processes that lead to a successful project implementation. PM’s use their knowledge, skills and effectiveness to incorporate the project management process groups and knowledge areas. If the project management process groups and knowledge areas are not effectively managed along with the team there will be project chaos. If your project is in chaos or total chaos, what areas of project management are not being effectively involved in your project? Do you need to look far?

I feel that without the utilisation of a project management process that projects will wander and drift like a message in a bottle, no charted course and an unknown destination. I have felt the pains of projects without process. They struggled with technology implementations, cost over-runs and the project scope in constant flux. The end result, failure.

I found that a similar team managed the next version of an application with a project management process in place, the results were outstanding. There was a solid scope document that provided the necessary information for user acceptance testing. There were five change requests made that went through the change control procedure, four were approved. The plan target date was not only achieved, but the work was completed ahead of schedule. Being ahead of schedule meant cost savings thus the project was completed under budget. All of this was achieved and there were no product defects.

Could this have been accomplished with people skills alone? Would you be able to create project symmetry without a project management process? I feel you already know the answers to these questions.

Finally, there is performance management. For the most part, this category falls under process management for all intensive purposes. I like to breakout performance management and look at it from a different perspective. The purpose of performance management is to answer the question ... How is your project coming along? When that is asked it should be able to address the triple constraints. Is the project on schedule? Is it within budget? Will it meet the project scope? By measuring the triple constraints, a PM can track the actual progress of a project and make adjustments based on this information. Performance management holds the team accountable and keeps the senior team informed.

Let's take a moment to look back at earlier questions. Are project managers nothing more than people managers? Is people management the most important function of a PM? My response to this is that project managers must balance both people and process management. One without the other will not provide the optimum outcome.

Special Note: I want to convey that I am not overlooking quality. Quality falls under the knowledge areas which is referred to in the earlier process writings. I hope to go into greater detail on this topic in a future article. In addition, I am not overlooking problem management. I feel that problem management falls under people management since problems are found by people and decisions are made by people.

With everything that has been presented here, it is important to keep in mind that project managers bring so much more to the success of a project than their ability to manage people. The three P's of project management, (people, process and performance management) take into account much of the criteria needed for successful project management. As project managers, we are trained, skilled and experienced in this field. If projects are going well we know we are doing the right things. If projects are not going well, reflect on this and take action to correct its course. How well are your projects being managed?

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