What is the Secret to Project Management?

~ By Peter Marci

As the director of the project management discipline for a leading Interactive Agency, I interview quite a few people. A standard question I ask during a typical first interview is “What do you feel is the secret to project management, in other words, what separates good project managers from great project managers?” It is a pretty open-ended question and there is no right answer, but it is a great question to gain greater insight into the depth of the candidate. The most common answer I get is “communication, making sure everyone knows what is going on.” While this is not incorrect, I think there is a much deeper and truth-seeking answer beyond this stock response. My answer to this question “emotional intelligence.” In his book, "Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers," Anthony Mersino, PMP states the following:

PMP certification does not in itself make a PM more capable; it simply proves that you have the requisite project management experience and can pass the multiple-choice certification exam. To be truly effective you need to be able to implement projects and work well with your team. Emotional intelligence will help you do that.

— Anthony Mersino, PMP

I could not agree more. The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) was first popularised by Daniel Goleman in 1995 with his book, "Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ." In his follow-up book in 1998 entitled "Working with Emotional Intelligence" Goleman presents an Emotional Intelligence framework for the workplace. Similarly, Mersino presents an Emotional Intelligence framework specific to project management. Both frameworks include a subject I would like to discuss and describe in greater detail. That topic is empathy. I'll define empathy as the ability to accurately interpret the thoughts and feelings of another individual. This is a skill that if practiced and applied is incredibly powerful if used in a positive and solution-based manner. This is also a skill that I preach (and try to teach) to the project management team at Molecular. It is also a skill that can be counter-intuitive to the mindset of the project manager. As project managers we are taught to control expectation, control scope, control budgets and we are measured on how well we do so. However, it is my perspective that through the use of empathy a project manager increases his/her ability to communicate in a manner that often times guides the client or team member to the best solution for the project given project constraints. For example, let’s take a very common project situation. A project manager is leading a facilitated meeting. There are tight timelines and budgets (as always). The customer gets an idea that in his/her mind is a fantastic idea will enhance business success that is out of scope based upon an agreement that was previously signed. Let’s approach the response to this situation two different ways:

The PM responds, great idea but that is not in scope we have tight timelines and we need to get this project completed by the end of the quarter…let’s move on. While I’ve exaggerated this response to make a point, the message received is probably not too far off.
Let's take a more empathic approach to the response:

The PM responds, I think that is a great idea can you tell me more about how you see it working? Starting with an open-ended question invites information to flow that leads to a response based upon an accurate interpretation of what the individual is trying to communicate. The idea could be something that fits within the timeline and budget established and it may not. If it does not, it might be an idea worthy of changing the budget and scope if it possesses the business value warranted. If true, the latter situation would benefit both organisations in the sense that greater business value is being delivered in exchange for greater investment in services (a win-win). If the business value is not there, more times than not the originator will arrive at that conclusion on their own through an open discussion and the idea is deferred to a future release. This can also position the project manager as a trusted advisor and someone who can engage in strategic thinking versus someone who squashes the thinking and creativity of the group.

Keys to expressing empathy:

1. **Ask Open-ended Questions**

Let the other person speak first by asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions invite information versus a close-ended question that introduces a power-play leaving the respondent wondering whether to disagree or agree with the answer contained in the question. Don't say "are you not getting that deliverable done because you disagree with the approach." A better approach would be to state: "I noticed we are running behind with this project deliverable, is there a reason that we need to discuss?"

2. **Tailor Your Response**

After working to understand the perspective and mindset of the other individual, tailor your response to fit the perspective. Instead of launching into a pre-meditated agenda, first understand and acknowledge the other person's perspective before introducing a differing point of view. Let the story unfold. Don't listen with your mind already made up.

3. **Control Your Emotions**

In the heat of the moment, often times the emotions of the situation boil over. If the discussion becomes emotionally charged and it is preventing or hindering a solution-based conversation, look to de-invest, let the emotions cool and try again later. Say "we're not communicating well at this time, let's table this conversation until a later time after we've had time to think about it some more."

4. **Avoid Snap Judgments**

Form judgments based upon the facts of the situation, not hearsay or other indicators which may be false or only partially true. If you're very familiar with the other individual you are working with there is a natural tendency to assume based on past interactions. Work to avoid this tendency as every interaction is different regardless of familiarity. When you begin to say to yourself "I know where this is going..." work to stop yourself and continue to listen.

5. **Put Yourself in the Other Person's Shoes**

Work to put yourself in the shoes of the other person. Ask yourself, what would I feel like if I were in that position? This will create a better understanding of the other person's perspective as well as create better
self-awareness within you. Imagine being the person who feels their idea has been invalidated by a scope-mongering project manager.

In applying these elements to your daily interactions with customers, colleagues and project teams your relationships will grow stronger and you will develop and gain greater respect and trust as a project manager. Whether you’re trying to communicate a scope change to a customer or trying to understand why your team is struggling with a specific task of phase of a project, the power of empathic listening will guide your interactions and separate you as a project manager.

So, the next time someone asks you what the secret to project management is, go beyond simply saying “communication” and discuss the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy. While it is not the secret, it is a way you can differentiate yourself from your PM peers.