

EXPERT SERIES

The “Expert Series” is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions’ associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

What Makes a Good Great Project Manager

by Debbie Bigelow Crawford, PMP

In 2000, I wrote “What Makes a Good Project Manager,” an article that was published in *PM Network* magazine. As I revisit this topic after a dozen years, taking into account new research, I am somewhat surprised – though I probably shouldn’t be – that the behavioral characteristics of a good project manager are still the same, just expanded and better validated. However, in talking about a **great** project manager, new attributes are emerging. We are seeing great project managers with stronger business acumen, who are more strategically focused. “Analytical, conceptual, and visionary” have become key attributes of a great project manager.

What do we really mean when we say that great project managers possess strong business acumen? We mean they demonstrate an acute understanding of how a business works and what it takes for the enterprise to make money. They combine financial literacy with business literacy, and so are able to recognize how strategies, behaviors, actions, and decisions not only affect the numbers but also drive profitable and sustainable growth.

Thus, great project managers need to be “business driven.” The business drivers need to come down from the strategic level, and be identified for each project during the portfolio process. Project managers however must understand and be able to articulate these drivers, and keep them in the forefront of their thinking while implementing core project management practices. This shift is being witnessed real time in today’s environment.

Some things have not changed, of course. I still contend that common threads are woven into the personalities of successful project managers:

- » Love of their work ... and embracing the challenges
- » Clear vision ... and communicating this vision
- » Strong team building skills ... and setting positive tones
- » Structure and alignment ... creating the environment and direction
- » Strong interpersonal skills ... listening to and leading their teams
- » Discipline ... completing each phase of the project properly
- » Communication skills...knowing when and to whom to communicate

These threads go by various nomenclatures -- “enthusiastic, optimistic, self-controlled, direct, team builders,” but the fabric is the same.

Another area I see emerging as we witness good project managers evolving into great project managers is a stronger *leadership* role. Great project managers command authority naturally and never let their team see them sweat. They possess quick sorting abilities, knowing what to act on and what to ignore. They are problem solvers, proactively exploring solutions outside their normal environment. The great project manager instinctively knows how to balance a situation and get the job done.

EXPERT SERIES

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Page 2 of 2

Project management itself has evolved over the last decade. It has crept into the business side of organizations, linking projects and strategies, combining a strategic focus with a business process for selecting and prioritizing projects. So, too, must the great project manager evolve.

Your organization will thrive if you choose a project manager who takes a broader view of project management, integrating closely with the requirements of executives and the business impact of their projects. A great project manager will possess the critical business attributes to execute strategic initiatives quickly and effectively to help their organizations respond to the rapid pace of change.

Are the project managers who lead your projects merely good ... and are you expecting great things from them? Training in the expanded and evolving role of the PM can tip the balance.