21st Century Project Management Competencies

Wayne Turk

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But as people began to share information, project management slowly became codified and more organized, and good practices were noted. Professional organizations like PMI (the Project Management Institute) came into being. Professional courses were developed. Seminars and conferences began to be held. Schools began to teach project management. In fact, schools like the Defense Acquisition University were developed to teach best practices and prepare PMs and those in associated fields to run successful projects. We saw the first vestiges of certifications; however, certifications of any kind were the exception rather than the rule. These days, however, more and more certifications are available—and sometimes required.

Professional Certifications

Admittedly certifications are only one measure of competency, but they are a visible and tangible measure. Certifications show that a person has met certain requirements and can be depended on to have specific skills and knowledge. Government agencies are in a state of flux as far as certifications go; sometimes they are required, and sometimes they aren't. As is so often the case, different government agencies are going in different directions. Even the rules in DoD are changing.

L et's talk about the 21st century for a minute. A few years ago, anyone mentioning the 21st century was either talking about the seemingly distant future or science fiction. It is not the future any more, but the here and now, and the 21st century program manager needs a whole new portfolio of competencies.

In the beginnings of project management, back when dinosaurs roamed the backyard, there was no training for PMs, no certifications, no professional organizations; the only requirement was to get the job done. Project management has even been called the "accidental profession" because people just stumbled into it. They were picked to run a project and had to learn by trial and error. And there were lots of errors to learn from.

Congress provided guidance for DoD through the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Acts. Because of DAWIA and DAWIA II, DoD is both constrained in what it *can* do and encouraged (read "directed") toward what it *must* do for a more professional and streamlined workforce. DAWIA begat the first requirements for PM certifications in DoD. While certifications are still required for some DoD PM positions, more flexibility on tenure and requirements for years of experience has been added

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under DAWIA II. The primary goal of both acts is in the name: Acquisition Workforce Improvement. I won't make the usual comments about getting more help than we need from Congress because the goal is admirable ... and the help is needed in this case.

DoD certifications come primarily from DAU training courses, after which people are certified at different levels: Level I – Basic; Level II – Intermediate; and Level III – Advanced. The Air Force Institute of Technology and the Naval Postgraduate School are also good sources of professional education for the PM in search of relevant degrees, certification, and continuing education.

Other agencies, most notably NASA and Health and Human Services, have instituted requirements for certifications in some cases. They are also providing training to help with those certifications. Most other agencies either haven't instituted requirements for certification yet, or their initiatives are still in the embryonic stage.

In and outside of government, the PMI certification of Project Management Professional (PMP) is probably seen by most as the gold standard. PMI has been acknowledged as the leader in the field and has more than 200,000 members, representing 125 countries. It sets a level of required expertise and professionalism that is recognized nationally and internationally in its PMP certification. Dozens of companies and organizations provide courses and help for individuals to achieve PMP.

It is not just in the United States that there is a movement toward required certifications. Many other counties, including Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom are on the certification bandwagon.

Certification requirements for more positions are probably just over the horizon. PMs, and those who want to be PMs, need to start preparing for them. But they are just one measure, just one of the competencies that are—or may be—required in this new century.

Practical Competencies

As a PM, you have to manage:
- People—your team and those associated person-

nel who sometimes work with you; upper management; the end users; the vendors; and everyone else who is a stakeholder.
- The financial intricacies—both what you plan to spend and what you do spend (often seemingly unrelated to each other).
- The schedule—the project schedule and all the individual tasks that are part of it.

Each of these areas requires somewhat different, but related, management competencies.

Managing People

Good project management requires good people-management skills. New managers frequently have few, if any, people-management skills and usually aren't really trained in managing. Upper management too often believes that if a person has great technical skills, then he or she can manage—and too many projects have problems because that isn't the case. But take heart if you're a new manager (or even a not-so-new one) because people-management skills can be learned. There are training courses. Mentors are always a possibility. There are books and articles on the subject. Take advantage of what is available to learn both the technical and people side of project management. Then put theory into practice.

In "Ten Rules for Success as a Manager," *Defense AT&L*, July-August 2004, I presented rules that define a basic people-management competency that is needed in the

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21st century. No rules—those or any others—are absolute. There will always be exceptions. Managers are chosen for their judgment and will have to decide when to deviate from the rules. Good judgment is, therefore, another competency.

It may be poor form to talk about managing your boss, but it's something that has to be done. You need to set realistic expectations with your boss and other stakeholders, (what they expect of you and the project). That includes expectations on schedule, costs, and the final product. The accent is on "realistic." Don't set expectations too high or you will ruin your credibility when they're not met, but don't intentionally set them low because that won't help you either. Most of boss management is just good communication. Keep him or her in the loop. Sometimes you may need to use selective communication, but you do need to communicate. To build your credibility, highlight your successes as they come along. If a test goes well, let people know. But don't try to hide bad news. It *will* come out—and better from you than others.

It is also important to manage the other stakeholders, of which there are many: upper management, the end users, vendors, other offices/organizations—in fact, anyone who has a stake in your project. Keep them informed. It doesn't have to be a constant flow of information, but updates are important. Briefing and writing skills are a subset of this. A PM is called on for both on a frequent basis.

It comes down to this: Good communications skill is a critical competency for good people management.

Managing the Budget and Schedule
The project budget and the project schedule can be the most difficult parts of a manager's duties. Meeting the schedule and staying within budget are critical to the real and perceived success of any project. Overrunning either is a sure means of being seen as a failure. The real competencies needed here are good planning skills and attention to detail. This is an area where tools can really help. Earned value management is one of the best. Many organizations offer courses in EVM to help the PM.

Common Sense Competencies
There are a slew of other competencies needed by PMs but rarely specified by organizations. Most of these are just common sense, but sometimes common sense is an uncommon attribute.

- Patience. A PM must have the patience of Job. There are going to be product problems, data calls, and documentation requirements, not to mention personnel problems; and they all require patience beyond the ordinary. Impatient PMs may take chances or shortcuts

that will cost them later. They also may not listen when they should.

- **Wisdom.** Not just expertise, but wisdom, too, is needed for decision making and problem resolution. Expertise is knowing what to do; wisdom is knowing when and how to apply the expertise.
- **Sense of humor.** Too many times, if we can't laugh at what is happening, we'd have to cry. A sense of humor helps make everything more tolerable. In the words of Don Seibert, former CEO and chairman of the board of the JC Penney Company, "Humor is a common thread I've seen in thousands of meetings in different companies on the most serious of subjects. Humor helps you to keep your head clear when you're dealing in highly technical information or difficult decisions where choices aren't that clear."
- **Flexibility.** While the joke says that "indecision is the key to flexibility," that is not what is meant here. PMs have to be flexible because change is constant in requirements, funding, personnel, documentation, and anything else related to the project. A PM has to be able to weather those changes without losing his patience, sense of humor, or capability to get the job done.
- **Creativity.** Sometimes creativity is a requirement for justifying funding, but it is always needed to keep to the schedule and get the project completed. Creativity in problem resolution can be critical to a PM's success.
- **Knowledge of the law of unintended consequences.** That law says that every action that you take or decision you make will have consequences that you didn't plan. (See "Project Management and the Law of Unintended Consequences," *Defense AT&L*, March-April, 2006).
- **Subject Matter Expertise.** While PMs don't have to be experts in every technical area of their project, it really helps to have some technical knowledge going into the job. The PM has to know the questions to ask and be able to brief others on the project. PMs must also be able to tell when they're not getting the full story. A blend of technical expertise and project management expertise is what is really needed. And as the 21st century progresses, more technical expertise will become critical.

Corporate Culture, Common Sense, and Continuous Learning

The corporate culture of your organization can certainly affect what works in your environment. Tailor what actions you take so they fit into that culture. You are probably not going to be able to change the culture, so learn to function in it. (In other words, be flexible—see above.) If you want to fight any aspect of the culture, pick your battles carefully, and make sure that you have allies, especially allies with power (see "Wisdom" above).

It is also common sense to know that theory and courses are all well and good, but that you have to have practical

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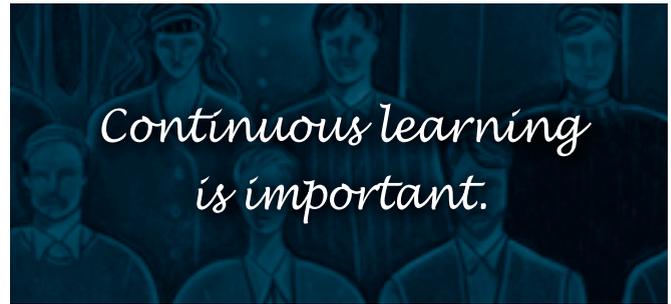
experience to go with theoretical knowledge. If you don't have personal experience, a good source of information is the experience of other PMs. They've been through it, seen the problems, and suffered what you're suffering. Learn from them what works and what doesn't. Mix that well with courses and professional reading and you have a recipe for PM expertise—one that even highly experienced PMs should embrace. Continuous learning is important.

With more requirements for certifications on the horizon and more competencies needed in all areas of project management, PMs need to take all the training that they can. That can be difficult, both from a time and a money point of view. If you can't take the training, at least do professional reading. DAU, the Air Force Institute of Technology, the Naval Postgraduate School, and PMI are good sources of information. There are also college courses, companies, and a number of good (free) Web sites with information that can help the neophyte and the experienced PM.

Apply common sense and basic management skills. Those skills are the basis of most of the competencies that you really need for any project. Get and use the tools that can help you and your project. EVM, mentioned earlier, is one. A good risk management program is another. Add a good requirements management system to your list of tools so that you can track, monitor, and test all requirements. There are others, but many will be specific to the project.

While it wasn't aimed at project management, Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965), British statesman and PM (in this case it is prime minister, rather than project manager), summed it up perfectly when he said "However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."

That's the bottom line—results. They are what PMs are paid for and what all of the competencies lead to. And welcome to the 21st century.