The Project Manager Dilemma

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Are You a Project Manager?

To determine your level of influence on your project teams, and whether your organization is making the most of your potential, you need a solid understanding of how your role is defined. This will ultimately impact the way that you communicate with your team, as well as your ability to efficiently and effectively complete your projects.

Does your organization employ Project Managers in title only? The answer to this question does not necessarily reflect badly on the enterprise, but understanding how project management is defined within your organization will aid you in determining the best approach to your projects — and how you interact with your project teams. Conversely, if your organization is in the process of determining the best way to handle its project management needs, there are some basic elements that should be considered. By examining the processes that your organization employs, and how those processes are reinforced, you can position yourself to be an agent of positive change.

For the purpose of this discussion, let's use three terms that are widely accepted when discussing levels of project management: Project Expediter, Project Coordinator, and Project Manager. These terms reflect the level of influence that the position holds within the project team, as well as the larger organization.

Project Expediter

This term is used primarily to describe an individual who serves in the capacity of a staff assistant. Project Expediters commonly function as support staff to a member (or members) of senior management who are overseeing some form of project work. Their primary responsibilities include coordinating communications among the project team, and providing project status reports to senior management. A person in this role does not make or enforce decisions.

The role of expediter is commonly found in a weak matrix (functional manager driven) organization. This shouldn't automatically equate to a negative image, but it should factor into the approach of the role. The responsibilities of the expediter are best suited to an environment where project team members need little guidance to complete their tasks on schedule.

Project Coordinator

The role of Project Coordinator is very similar to that of Project Expediter, with the same responsibilities. The one major difference is that he or she has some power to make decisions. Additionally, the Project Coordinator generally reports to a higher-level manager.

This position is also found in a weak matrix organization. As with most elements of project management, communication is of high-importance. To avoid confusion as to
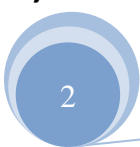
the level of your ability to make decisions as the coordinator, clearly articulate the level of support that you'll need from both your project team and senior management.

Project Manager

If you are truly functioning as a Project Manager, you have the authority to make the decisions that are necessary for the well-being of the project. Put simply, the Project Manager is responsible for the successful completion of the project. He or she has the authority to assign individual tasks to team members, and ensure that those tasks are completed on schedule and on budget.

This role thrives in a strong matrix, "projectized organization" where the power lies with the Project Manager. It can also be found in a balanced matrix, where Project Managers and functional managers share power and responsibility.

What is the right fit for your organization?

This can best be answered by determining how far along your organization is in defining its processes, and how truly invested it is in adopting a project management-based working environment. As we've discussed here, quite often people are given the title of "Project Manager" but are not given the authority (or training) to effectively and successfully shepherd their projects through to completion.

If you do work for an organization that empowers project managers to make and enforce decisions, or one that is working towards that goal, there still might be a need for expediters or coordinators. For instance, if you are a Project Manager in this type of environment and are tasked with large projects, there might be a need to create a project management team. This team can be comprised of people who are responsible for assisting in the oversight of project tasks. An expediter or coordinator could be a key member of the team, responsible for the day-to-day communications, and reporting back to the Project Manager on the status of the project at any given time.

Regardless of where your organization falls on the spectrum of project management, it can only be a benefit to know how to classify your role. If all parties have an understanding of your level of influence, you'll be able to better navigate the streams of communication. Additionally, you'll be able to better assess whether or not your group is on the right path.

By having a firm grasp on your role, and how it interacts with other members of the project team, you will have the opportunity to offer tangible feedback to senior management. This feedback may well affirm that the current organizational structure is optimal, but it might also provide the catalyst for the type of change that could propel your organization towards a more efficient way of doing business.

About the Author

Management Professional with 35 years of experience managing over $4 billion in projects for both the Commercial and Federal Government sectors and is a well-known project management (PM) author, consultant, and authority on the subjects of Construction Management (CM), Facility Management (FM), Business Process Management (BPM), Project Management Office (PMO) and Project Portfolio Management (PPM), Risk Management (RM), software development and technology integration.

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