

## LEVERAGING THE HUMAN FACTOR FOR SUCCESSFUL PROJECT OUTCOMES

DF Boninelli

This article focuses on various people problems that project managers encounter ranging from the team members having a functional management loyalty, to having the inappropriate staff for a project. The article then looks at the key competencies required by project managers to manage successful outcomes.

The article looks at the restructuring and realigning of the Protea Emergency Service call centre as a project. Various solutions to these problems are proposed and a framework of skills and competencies required by the project manager in order for him/her to make a success of the project are discussed. The article also touches on the importance of leadership as one of the skills that a project manager requires. An assessment of the skills that the Protea Emergency Service project manager used and the identification of skills and competencies that were lacking are also addressed.

**KEY phrases:** competencies, leadership, problems, project management, Protea Emergency Service, skills

### INTRODUCTION

A lot of literature has been written about the technology aspects, the cost problems and the scheduling problems of projects. But the factor that often gets underestimated is the human factor within projects. According to Steyn, Basson, Carruthers, Du Plessis, Kruger, Prozesky-Kuschke, Van Eck & Visser. (2003:215): "Despite the developments in project management technology, people are still the kingpin in projects."

Most of the problems that project managers encounter appear to be scheduling or cost problems, but can in fact can be traced back to a human factor. According to the Standish Group, 31 percent of projects are cancelled before completion (Laws 1998:1) costing billions of Rand every year. It is believed that the majority of problems facing projects arise from the human factor/people issues. The project management process focuses heavily on the logical process rather than on the interpersonal dynamics that occur among team members.

It has been found that many projects fail due to the poor skills of the project manager and their lack of knowledge of various people problems that they could encounter and the various solutions to these problems. A lot of resources are put into projects that then fail and are therefore wasted. This is not due to problems in technology or

cost control but rather in the human factor. This article discusses the various human factor problems that project managers may encounter and how, by using the correct skills, the project manager can overcome these problems. The article addresses the importance of the leadership skills a project manager should possess as well as using the Protea Emergency Service call centre restructuring as an example for further explanation.

## **PROTEA EMERGENCY SERVICE**

### **Background**

Protea Emergency Service was experiencing problems with their call centre in that costs were rising without a corresponding increase in revenue, staff seemed to be struggling with the volume of calls and absenteeism was increasing, and customer satisfaction levels were dropping.

An example of this was the problem of transferring calls to another call taker when the call taker was not able to speak the caller's language. What was currently happening was that the call taker would stand up and shout across the call centre to ask for anyone who could speak the caller's language. An available person would then walk over to that person's desk and plug their headset into the call and take it from there. This process worked but did not work as efficiently as it should.

A possible solution to this problem was that an information system could be set up whereby as each employee clocks in, their name would appear on an electronic list. This list would have the call takers name, booth/seat number, the languages that they felt comfortable taking emergency calls in and the person's availability status. So when a caller called in and could not speak the caller's language he could simply transfer the caller to an available call taker who could speak that language.

Another problem was the coordination of call backs to the customer. This was not running efficiently at the time and it was suggested that an information system should be implemented to assist in this process. A further concern was the pressure put on the staff to reduce the call handling times. While this is a matter of staff training and effective use of the staff, it was felt the right technology and information systems could assist with improving response times. They also wanted to implement outbound calling to improve revenue generation.

## **The project**

Protea Emergency Service embarked on a major project to restructure their call centre. This included the implementation of some new call centre technology with a sophisticated call tracking and information system. This was accompanied with a restructure of the layout of the call centre and plans were put in place for retraining all centre staff. It was felt that all these changes would result in increased productivity, reduced costs and better customer service. Initially, the major challenges were anticipated to be difficulties in implementing the technology and preventing project scope creep with the resultant increase in costs. However, as the project progressed, it became obvious that they had underestimated the people factors in their project planning and these created some significant challenges to the successful completion of the project.

## **The project problems**

The first people challenge was the business unit managers of the Protea Emergency Service and their employees did not know enough about other call centres to be in a position to benchmark. The next issue was that the top management wanted to see these managers being more creative and innovative and to really push the boundaries in their approach to cost cutting, which they were not doing. It was decided that they needed to visit various call centres on a regular basis in order to be able to compare and benchmark and learn best practices.

However, as they did not have clear benchmarks at the beginning of the project, this resulted in changing the target objectives part of the way through the project. In addition to this, the most senior manager in the call centre proved to be a stubborn impractical boss. She resented the fact that the restructuring of the call centre had not been her idea and persisted in trying to influence the project manager to do things her way – despite the fact that she had no project management experience at all. The difficult dynamics of this situation had in part been created by politics within the company as the General Manager Operations had never adequately addressed with the Call Centre Manager her lack of leadership and her inability to address several staff related problems. With the project manager's assistance, it was possible to define what behaviours should be displayed by the management of the project that would support the required leadership competencies.

The next problem that the managers declared was that there was *insufficient communication* going on between the three business units (nursing, dispatch and 911 call taking) and the project manager. Hence the solutions that were being designed for the call centre were not necessarily taking into account the issues of the other two business units. The project manager had been submitting regular reports to the key stakeholders but had spent insufficient time actually talking to the people on the ground as to the difficulties they were experiencing. It was agreed that the business unit managers would make an effort to communicate more and be more open with each other and have regular meetings to arrive at joint solutions. The project manager also instituted a series of focus group discussions so that he could listen to the concerns of the different groups and adequately address these in the project plan.

The next problem was the *inappropriate staff* on the project. Few of them had project management skills and because they were not assigned to the project full-time, there was *functional management loyalty* rather than project loyalty. This was symptomatic of the general poor utilisation of staff in the call centre. *Staff usage* was not effective, in that the call centre was overstaffed at various times where employees were not being used to their full capacity. Then other times there were staff shortages resulting in over-stressed employees trying to do more work than they could deal with. This then resulted in the service level also dropping. The next dilemma was the trouble with too much *overtime and high absenteeism*. The impact on the project was that at times of staff shortages, key staff was being removed from the project to deal with call centre crises. This problem was addressed for the project through the project manager meeting with the call centre managers to arrange the reassignment of more appropriate staff and better time allocation.

The next issue was the *lack of focus* of the call centre managers and their staff. It has already been mentioned that a project manager should be wary of projects that have poor plans or a lack of support or projects with impossible or unfocused goals. Fortunately, the project manager identified this danger early and addressed it in a very structured fashion. The solution to this was that the managers would need to set project goals more clearly and monitor progress against the goals at least once a week. It was also suggested that the managers get together with their staff every second week to have a meeting to discuss the current goals progress and any new goals that were necessary to be set. This would ensure the understanding and buy-in of the staff.

While the project manager in the Protea Emergency Service scenario used a number of skills to overcome the obstacles he was facing and as a result was able to carry the project forward, it is obvious that he had significantly underestimated the people factors in the project. He clearly lacked skills in managing change processes and the emotional and other resistance factors that accompany major change. His communication skills were also inadequate and had to be improved part way through the project. Most importantly, the project manager lacked the leadership characteristics that would have enabled him to align the project to the strategic objectives of Protea Emergency Service, communicate this in such a way that all participants would have bought into the process. The project manager showed a lack of understanding of what the customers and key stakeholders wanted and how to construct solutions that met their expectations. Part of this would have entailed the skill of assisting them to clarify their expectations and desired outputs before the project was officially launched.

The review of the literature has revealed that the problems encountered in the Protea Emergency Service case study are typical of the people problems experienced on many other projects, as outlined below.

### **PEOPLE PROBLEMS THAT PROJECT MANAGERS ENCOUNTER**

Project managers must realise that most problems are predictable and this includes various people problems. Managers should be proactive in the pursuit of discovering possible problems and plan in advance for them. The point is that change preludes problems. As Phillip Crosby once said "If anything is certain, it is that change is certain". From that we can deduce that due to the fact that change is inevitable it is inevitable that project managers will always need to deal with problems, as they are a product of change.

Change can also bring opportunities. It is in the manager's hands whether change is converted into an opportunity or a problem. If the project manager can plan for change he will most likely be able to turn the change into an opportunity. Charles Darwin once stated, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." Managers need to keep that in mind.

Project managers must be honest in their assessment of the problem and document their findings. The project manager must then inform the boss or client and any other necessary people about the problem.

that project managers can encounter Various problems. The main ones are discussed next.

### **Changing target objectives**

When changes are requested too often on a project, it indicates a lack of consensus regarding the original project plan or some other big problem between manager, project, stakeholders and company. This shows a lack of quality communication. The project manager needs to make sure the authority for making project changes is clearly documented in the project plan.

The project manager must not start a project until the plan is approved by all the appropriate levels of management and other appropriate stakeholders, including clients to ensure that this problem does not occur. The project manager must not promise to implement any changes to a project until he has had time to analyse and document the proposed changes.

### **Stubborn and impractical boss**

If a project manager is suffering from a line manager boss who believes that he is all-knowing and suggests or enforces projects that are outlandish and unreasonable, it is recommended that the project manager highlight in detail the problems that could arise. It is advisable to document the potential problems that the project manager foresees and submit it to the boss and other key stakeholders.

If the boss is not interested in the project managers suggestions and discards them, and forces the project manager into pursuing the project, it is suggested that the project manager put the process into practice using the basics of good project management, leadership, and common sense to try achieving what he can.

If the project fails, the project manager would have covered himself by having suggested that he believed the project was doomed to fail.

### **Functional management loyalty**

Motivating and leading team members who are not directly reporting to the project manager is challenging. These employees can tend to be disinterested in the project as it does not form part of their performance evaluation nor their reward plan. The team member will be loyal to their functional manager.

The solution to this problem is to work in a partnership with the relevant functional managers and agree to the project manager participating in each employees' performance review and hence rewards. The project manager must exercise his leadership subtly so that he stimulates eager and constructive support for the project and the project team without causing attitudes toward functional departments to weaken. The leadership needs to foster strong positive loyalties both to the project and to the functional department.

### **Politics within the company**

It is suggested that if there are politics within the company and they don't affect the end results of the project, the project manager should monitor them but not spend too much time focusing on them. However, if the political agendas start undermining project goals, the project manager should treat the politics as any other conflict and resolve the situation through appropriate conflict resolution techniques.

### **Lack of communication**

Project Managers sometimes bog their project down in paperwork with too many reports in the mistaken assumption that written reports will suffice for communication (Gantthead 2005:2). This will impact quality, motivation and schedules. Make a list of all the reports being produced for the project, which is responsible for them, and what their contents are. Managers must critically review each to make sure it is necessary, stays simple, and conveys the necessary information.

Managers must then visit critical team members on a regular basis and continue to do so. Then they must meet with people informally and ask how the project is going. Informal meetings often result in honest communications (i.e. management by walking around!). One cannot stress sufficiently that project managers need to have

their ear to the ground and be able to detect the people problems of motivation, lack of skills, organisational conflict, etc. in order to proactively address these.

### **Inappropriate staff**

This problem arises when the project team is compiled of great achievers but yet may not have the appropriate skills sets in terms of the project. The key focus is on getting the right people in the right project at the right time and keeping them right during the project lifecycle (Steyn *et al.* 2003:217). The project manager needs to develop an objective skills appraisal system to select team members at the beginning of the project to ensure that the team members are correct for this project.

### **Key staff quitting or being removed from the project**

Many projects rely on the special skills of a single key person. It could prove catastrophic if that person had to leave. It is vital that that person and any other key people are kept happy. If they are dissatisfied, it is up to the project manager to find out why and then to rectify the problem. Another consideration is to cross-train people. Training will minimise the impact of losing a key person. At the same time, it will allow key people to take needed breaks and vacations, knowing their work is covered. The project manager needs to be sure the key people are team players and that their work is documented.

### **Lack of authority**

The amount of authority that a project manager will be given will be dependant on the type of organisational structure. In a functional organisation, project managers must be wary to not upset any of the other managers by disregarding the chain of command. In a functional organisational structure, the project manager has little and sometimes no authority. This is very difficult for the project manager to deal with. Good communication, interpersonal and negotiating skills are required for a manager to overcome this problem.

## **THE VARIOUS SKILLS REQUIRED BY PROJECT MANAGERS**

Project managers must be generalists with many skills at their disposal. The project manager must also possess core competencies in project related fields and business management.



However, technical skills are not an absolute prerequisite for successful project outcomes as they can hire the technical skills or gain technical advice they require. A thorough understanding of *project management skills*, as well as general management skills is required by the project manager. In addition, the project manager needs to know how to apply these skills in the relevant situation.

A key skill is the skill of *planning and organising*. There are multiple documents that need to be kept in order, filed and tracked so that when the information is required it can be accessed quickly and efficiently (Heldman 2004:9). The project manager must organise teams, organise meetings, prioritise problems, and manage his time.

The next skill would be that of *budgeting*. The project manager should have some knowledge of finance and accounting principles as he will be required to work with financial information and produce budgets for his project. He will be required to perform cost estimates as well. He needs to have sufficient knowledge in order to be able to assess and understand retailer quotes, purchase orders, invoices and more.

The key skill of concern is the project manager's *communications skill*. This may well be the most important skill for a project manager to master. Communication can be done orally, in written documents or even in a non-verbal manner. Project communication is done through the use of project documents, meeting updates, status reports and more. The information should be explicit, clear and complete. The project manager has a large communicating responsibility. He has to communicate with all the stakeholders involved with the project. The ability to provide valuable information related to the project status in a timely and effective manner is a valuable skill (Vitiello 2001:3). It is advisable for the project manager to ask questions, listen, observe and communicate clearly and honestly in order to reduce the impact of most project problems. Using good listening skills to truly hear and try to understand what others on the project are trying to say plays an important role in communication (Vitiello 2001:3). Last but not least, project managers must tailor their messages to be appropriate to the different audiences. Affected staff will want to know how it will affect their day-to-day jobs and whether they will cope with the changes whereas senior management may be more concerned with timelines and cost controls.

The next skill is *negotiating and influencing skills*. The project manager needs to know how to work well with others and have the ability to influence the various

people he encounters in order for him to achieve his objectives. The project manager must have tact and charm to negotiate difficult situations to overcome a disagreement. Successfully negotiating with people will influence the course of events or conditions of an agreement or other important aspects of project management. It is an essential skill to obtaining the best possible results. The project manager must however take into consideration the organisational structure before embarking on his negotiation pursuit as different negotiation tactics are required for different organisational structures. Vitiello (2001:3) states that maintaining relationships with people who are involved in the project is part of the negotiating skills project managers will require.

A very important skill that most project managers will need to use somewhere along their career would be the *skill to influence without having authority*. This requires persuasion techniques and the ability to influence people without direct authority and obtaining win-win situations. Energy and attitude gives the project manager power.

*Team-building and human resource management skills* are the next skill to be discussed. These skills are required due to the fact that teams are often formed with people from different parts of the organisation. These people may have not worked together before so team building skills are hence required here. The project manager needs to work through the various team-forming stages until the team becomes a fully functional team (Heldman 2004:10). Motivating team members who are not directly reporting to the project manager is challenging. These employees can tend to be disinterested in the project as it does not form part of their performance evaluation nor their reward plan. This skill according to Vitiello (2001:3) assists the team members in understanding their roles and responsibilities on the project and work collaboratively.

A project manager must also know how to support his team members and staff. Coaching team members and staff is another important skill that the project manager must possess. The project manager must feel comfortable and capable of delegating work.

Project managers also need to know how to *manage conflict*. This is important because where there are people, there will be conflict. The project manager must know how to deal with conflict and manage people and their issues. The project manager must be able to listen and understand the situation and deal with it without

inflicting any biases. Vitiello (2001:3) states that the manager must assist in resolution of any project conflicts so that the project team members all feel part of the process and want to remain involved in the project. The project manager should use various conflict resolution techniques to resolve the issues at hand. A few of these techniques include withdrawing, accommodating, competing, compromising, collaborating or confronting (Steyn *et al.* 2003:239). This is an important skill as the minute something goes wrong, people are quick to blame others rather than trying to help the other team members with the problem (Laws 1998:8). There are various types of conflict, being goal-orientated, administrative and interpersonal conflict (Steyn *et al.* 2003:237). This article will however focus on the interpersonal conflict.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP**

Project leadership is an ability to influence the people towards voluntary action and thereby get things done well. It involves providing clear compelling directions to achieve project objectives by developing and fostering teamwork. The project manager needs to act as an entrepreneur during the initiation phase, as a communicator and team builder during the development phase, as a performer and integrator during the execution phase and administrator during the closure phase of the project life cycle. (Steyn *et al.* 2003:242). The project manager should guide team members by identifying their roles and responsibilities for the project and he should inspire the team members to successfully complete the project tasks for the good of the project (Verzuh 1999:25).

According to Martin (2002:1-3) there are various principles to project leadership.

- The first of these is that people own what they participate in creating. Some project leaders fear losing control of the project if the team participates. The opposite is actually true, the project is under more control because teams make better decisions and are more committed to carrying them out.
- The next principle is that people are inspired by what is meaningful to them. If the project manager can connect the project to the strategic goals of the organisation the team will be more effective as individuals and more effective as a team.
- The next principle is that team members that understand how the parts of a project fit together are more committed to making the project successful.

- The fourth principle is team buy-in is increased if team members work from shared information. Allowing all team members to contribute and allow the team to reach consensus on a decision or solution will increase the buy-in.
- The next principle is that the project manager should show his appreciation for the contributions of each individual on the team and for the team as a whole. Taking time to recognise accomplishments will have great positive results.
- The sixth principle is in order for the project manager to build a team, he must build and maintain an environment of mutual trust and respect.
- The last principle is that the project manager must empower his team. He could do this by allowing the team to contribute to the project plan and allow the team to even take ownership of the project plan during execution. These seven principles are believed to produce more effective project management leaders (Martin 2002:3).

These points indicate the importance and the value of leadership. Leadership should not be overlooked in projects as it impacts on the staff's productivity. Veal (2004:1) believes that while management is responsible for producing and maintaining a degree of predictability and order, leadership on the other hand is responsible for producing change. Leaders must develop a vision and strategies for producing the change needed to achieve that vision.

Project leaders need to align their team by communicating the project direction and ensuring that the team understands and accepts the project direction, vision and strategy. Leaders are also responsible for motivating and inspiring their team. They need to energise people to overcome major political, bureaucratic and resource barriers to change. Leaders are required to ensure positive long-lasting change for the project. "Leaders inspire, whereas managers organise" (Veal 2004:1). Without inspiration, the team will not perform the best, so it is clear that inspiration and thus leadership, is required for the best project outcomes.

A leader is very different from a manager. This is something that the managers at Protea Emergency Service focused on at their management conference in February 2005. Leaders impart vision, gain consensus for strategic goals, establish direction, and inspire and motivate others.

The next aspect of leadership is the fact that the type of leadership style required changes during the project lifecycle due to the specific challenges which each stage

poses. (Steyn *et al.* 2003:220). The implementation stage would require good communication and motivation skills. Conflict handling and performance evaluation will take place in the later stages (Steyn *et al.* 2003:220-221).

## A FRAMEWORK OF SKILLS THAT PROJECT MANAGERS REQUIRE

In Table 1 is a framework of the skills and competencies that project managers require in order to make a success of the projects they work on.

Table 1 Framework of skills that project managers require

Project co-ordination	Understanding customer needs	Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops projects from concepts through to implementation</li> <li>• Manages projects including budgets and adherence to project timelines</li> <li>• Plans and organises the various stages of the project</li> <li>• Builds team-work and manages project resources</li> <li>• Uses negotiating and influencing skills to ensure project outcomes are achieved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands what customers and key stakeholders want and how to construct solutions that meet their current and future expectations as closely as possible.</li> <li>• Quick to develop practical solutions to meet issues raised by stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops a vision and strategies for producing change</li> <li>• Motivates and inspires the team</li> <li>• Ensures team participation</li> <li>• Connects the project to the strategic goals of the organisation</li> <li>• Communicates how the parts of the project fit together</li> <li>• Ensures team members work from shared information</li> <li>• Takes time to recognise accomplishments</li> <li>• Empowers the team</li> </ul>
Understanding and leveraging technology	Relationship building	Change management

Source: Adapted from Standard Bank (1998:8).

This table is a guide for practical implementation of the skills required by a project manager and should take into account the following:

- Training of project managers should cover all the elements mentioned in the framework.
- Project managers should use the framework in their project planning to ensure that they have proactively addressed all the potential obstacles including the people factors.

- Project managers should also use this framework to do a self-audit of their skills. It will indicate where their strengths are and in what areas they require more training or knowledge.
- The importance of leadership ability in a project manager cannot be underestimated. It therefore highlights the need to select the correct profile of individual for the role of project manager. The old concept that project managers required mainly technical and business skills to ensure successful project outcomes has clearly been highlighted as deficient.

## **CLOSURE**

This article shows the importance of project managers utilising the full breadth of skills and competencies that they need in order to produce the best results in projects. Many projects fail due to the poor change management and poor leadership skills of the project managers as well as their lack of knowledge of various people problems that they could encounter and the solutions to these problems. Countless resources are put into projects that subsequently fail and are therefore wasted. This article enlightens managers on the various people problems they may encounter and how to deal with these using the appropriate skills. The article has also highlighted the importance of leadership as one of the skills of a project management.

There are various clusters of competencies that managers need in order to succeed. Protea Emergency Service's call centre restructuring project was used as an example in the article to show the practical implementation of these skills and has shown the real-life problems that Protea Emergency Service has encountered. The article looked at specific problems that Protea Emergency Service encountered as well as other problems that project managers may encounter upon embarking on any project. Various solutions to these problems were proposed and a framework of skills and competencies required by the project manager in order for him/her to make a success of the project were discussed.

This review of Protea Emergency Service has shown the value of the project manager being well informed about the problems he may encounter and the solutions to these problems. Top management should ensure that their project managers know the skills required of them, and top management should supply the resources for their project managers to acquire those skills if they do not already possess them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**GANTTHEAD.** 2005.. Common project management problems. [Internet: <http://www.gantthead.com/templates/download.cfm?ID=221332>; [accessed 2005-03-15.]

**HELDMAN K.** 2004. Project management professional: Study Guide. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Sybex: San Francisco.

**KANER S.** 1996. Participatory decision making. Philadelphia PA: New Society.

**LAWS RC.** 1998. Organisation Development: A solution to project management problems. Internet: <http://www.sonoma.edu/users/s/smithh/odlibrary/pdffiles/1998/rlaws.pdf>; accessed: 005-03-25.] [Unpublished thesis].

**MARTIN PK.** 2002. Principles of project leadership. Internet: <http://www.martintraining.com>; accessed: 2005-04-05.]

**PROTEA EMERGENCY SERVICE.** 2003. Annual report. Sandton [Press statement, 17 November 2003]:1-108.

**PROTEA EMERGENCY SERVICE.** 2004. Annual report. Sandton [Press statement, 15 November 2004]:1-131.

**PROTEA EMERGENCY SERVICE.** 2005. Protea Emergency Service management conference. Johannesburg.

**STANDARD BANK.** 1998. Internal report on project manager profiles and descriptors. Johannesburg.

**STEYN H, BASSON G, CARRUTHERS M, DU PLESSIS Y, KRUGER D, PROZESKY-KUSCHKE B, VAN ECK S & VISSER K.** 2003. Project management: a multi-disciplinary approach. Pretoria: FPM.

**VEAL R.** 2004. Project management and leadership: Equal Partners for Project Success. Internet: <http://www.asapm.org/resources/Leadership1.pdf>; accessed: 2005-04-12.]

**VERZUH E.** 1999. Project manager's types of leadership. Internet: <http://maxwideman.com/guests/servant/leadership.htm>; accessed: 2005-04-10.]

**VITIELLO J.** 2001. Fast track into management. [Internet: <http://www.computerworld.com/careertopics/careers/training/story/0,10801,62157,00.html>; accessed: 2005-04-10.]