Critical Thinking in Project Management

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Abstract

This paper is to analyze and reflect on a scholarly, peer-reviewed article on if project managers practice what they preach? This article highlights specific project management practices, how often they are being used, and do they lead to a higher project success rate. There will be a reflection on stated implied importance to these practices along with the PMBOK inclusion of the process. This paper is a critical thinking essay. The author will provide insight from his perspective throughout the paper and provide tangible organizational work-related experience.

Introduction

This article reflects on various practices that lead to project success. Do project managers practice project management processes they claim they are doing, or do they side step to save time? The article focuses on various factors and standards that have been developed over time that have been paved the way to contribute towards project success. The article provides various project management practices that are tracked through metrics and show that when project managers comply with these practices, it leads to higher project success.

Project managers still focus on the iron triangle; costs, time and scope. These objectives continue to be the primary focus for all deliverables in a project. However, there are practices that may get overlooked. In this article, according to Shields and Quan (2010), "project management practices are being used, however they are not being applied equally or consistently across all knowledge areas (pg. 651)". This article provides metrics on certain people-orientated process that are not applied because of various reasons.

Stated and Implied importance

Project management is one of the fastest growing career fields in the world. It is estimated that certain areas of project management, such as construction and IT could expand by over 35% over the next decade. According to (Frame, 2017), "demand for qualified project professional's due to industry growth and worker attrition, project manager orientated labor force will grow by 33% by 2027" (pg. 7). In this rapidly expanding career field, standards and practices have been developed over time that have contributed towards project success. However, not all project managers apply project management processes equally across all knowledge areas.

This paper addresses what leads to project success and do project management practice the tools, techniques, and practices to deliver towards success. This paper will also address, what project management techniques are used, compared to what techniques are ignored. Shields and Quan (2010) state that project management success focus on deliverables, objectives and goals that are met on time and within budget. Overall project success focuses more on customer satisfaction or customer orientated results (pg 650). These different perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The authors further explain, "to have project success, project managers need to implement practices and standards. People orientated processes are not measurable, so therefore they do not get as much attention (pg 653)". Unfortunately, items that go ignored are the areas that can become issues as the project progresses.

Critical Success Factors (CSF)

Shields and Quan (2010) explain how critical success factors (CSF) are defined as characteristics, conditions or variables that can have significant impact on the success of the project when properly sustained, maintained or managed. Project managers focus on areas that are measurable (scope, time and costs). These items are also considered the most critical for the project. It is discussed in the article that processes that are practiced less tend to be more associated with people. The authors from the article took a survey of project managers, that practices that are least utilized across knowledge areas are human resources, risk management, and procurement. These processes are harder to quantify; therefore, they are not tracked as closely resulting in less attention. Also, project managers that deal with similar projects year in and year out, are familiar with the industry and standards. They know what works and contributes towards success when dealing with the same type of projects and stakeholders. This can contribute towards a certain level of ego and complacency. Not all projects are the same

either. Project can range in size, cost, duration and complexity. Regardless of experience in the field, dealing with project management, there are just so many different variables, in which too many things that can go wrong. No two projects are identical and each must be carefully initiated, planned, executed, monitored and controlled. Each project has different risks along with different stakeholders involved that must be identified and managed. Risk management from my perspective, would seem like should require way more attention than what this article presents. In my work environment, risk analysis would only be on the qualitative level. During stakeholder meetings or status report meetings, leaders would communicate the tangibles to execute the project and supervision would address superficial risks. They would never really have a risk owner, identify impact and probability, or have any type of contingency plan. When things did go wrong, (and they did) they would point the blame down the chain of command, bail themselves out; and usually the lowest ranking individual in the room would get reprimanded. This occurred through most of my military career. Unfortunately, problems are not being resolved. People blame and point the finger because its easy. I believe that regardless of working projects that are similar, it would be setting oneself up for failure to rely on "how things should work". I believe, as soon as one adopts that philosophy or mindset, that is when catastrophe happens.

Keys to success

Shields and Quan (2010) interviewed over 53 project managers and consolidated their results on what project managers across different industries view as keys to project success (pg 660).

1. Updating and formalizing changes to scope statement are vital in meeting cost and time targets as well as satisfying clients. Change is going to happen throughout the life of the

project. This can come about in many different paths. Customers can implement changes half way through a project or decide on making additions or upgrades. Supervision can decide that time is critical, get this project done ahead of schedule so that the project team can redirect efforts. The scope statement needs to be updated along with any accepted changes requests. PMI (2013) states that the key benefits of the scope statement is that it defines or describes the product, service, or result boundaries and requirements needed to be included in the project scope (pg. 120). These boundaries need to be closely and continuously monitored throughout the life of the project. This includes all project management documents that are to be effected by any implemented changes. Changes that are identified earlier in the project will have less impact.

2. Project deliverable lists: having clear, realistic objectives and increased awareness. This relates to taking the time to adequately plan a statement of work and develop the work break down structure (WBS). These two areas, developing a statement of work and WBS are two areas that need to be well thought out and planned accordingly. If I am leading a branch of a large complex project, it is critical that my team know exactly the list of deliverables and milestones. There must be a clear target. If this process becomes foggy and ambiguous, executing the plan becomes very difficult. Also, the probability of risks becomes greater and team members become unmotivated and lose interest. This can have a catastrophic chain reaction.

These lists can be updated through status reports. Larson and Gray (2014) state, "a status report is analogous to a camera snapshot of a project at a specific point time. The status report uses earned value to measure schedule and cost performance (pg. 468)". It is also vital to make updates when conducting staff meetings. It is very frustrating being

in a meeting and everyone is arguing over not meeting a deadline. These deadlines were missed because there were not clear objectives set initially during the planning phase.

3. Communication with customers: this can fall on Stakeholder Management process and stakeholder analysis. The PMI (2013), PMBOK 5th ed., states that stakeholder management consists of taking into all individuals or groups that have significant impact on the project (pg 391). Project teams need to identify these groups and make sure they establish rapport to meet their needs and expectations. Communication with customers along with project teams is vital for project success. This is a skill that I am continuously developing. I have to learn what method of communication my customers prefer, frequency, along with listening and delivering on needs and expectations.

4. Contingency plans: This can be a result of risk management along with quantitative risk analysis. Risks are something that are always addressed at every status meeting. Departments will communicate to supervision on where they sit on a phase of a project. If changes need to occur or something outside of the plan needs to take place, certain risk factors need to be communicated and voiced before the decision is made. In my work environment, if it was high impact, a decision would typically not be made until other stakeholders got involved. Contingency plans need to be put in place in case the project management plan gets diverted. This can consist of additional resources, man power or extra time to get the project back on track.

Task Orientated vs. People Orientated

Cost, scope and time processes (CSF) will continue to get the most attention in any project. These factors focus on what the customer wants and ultimately delivers on customer satisfaction. Is it possible for a project to be successful yet fall short on being considered a project management success? Again, this article conveys the message that some project management practices that are being ignored, lean more towards people orientated. Shields and Quan (2010) state that practices such as human resources, quantitative risk analysis, stakeholder analysis, and procurement management (pg. 658), are examples of certain processes in which project managers fall short.

In my perspective, it is hard to determine if one takes precedence over the other. Customer satisfaction will always be the highest priority. The project may take twice as long or resources may cost twice as much as estimated, however if the customer is satisfied, all is good in the end. Dealing with project management, there must be a balance between meeting objectives and taking care of people. In my line of work, I have always been taught managing people, that if you take care of your people, they will take care of you. My philosophy is that they do not work for me, I work for them. I ensure they have everything that they need (physically, mentally, and emotionally) to be ready to do the very best work they can. This philosophy has worked for me. As a manager, I strived to make sure the people that worked for me were adequately trained, new exactly what was expected of them, and continued to lead by example to motivate and create a culture to where they enjoyed coming to work. I would do all of this in parallel to meeting our unit's objectives day in and day out.

Management in general, involves integrating your team, addressing expectations and ensuring objectives are being pursued. As a manager, it important to clarify rules of engagement from top management and resolve any internal conflict. These are skills that are not learned through theory or academically. These skills are developed over time, and require patients. This can be why project managers don't always practice what they preach. They focus on the critical areas of the project that are measurable and dismiss on aspects on team development.

My experience in the military and what I have learned from this program is that team building is essential for any organization to be successful and it starts with trust and motivation. This of course requires time and effort. In reviewing this article, it is understandable how some processes get less attention. Project managers should acquire skills to identify, build, maintain, motivate, lead, and inspire project teams to achieve high team performance and to meet the project's objectives. Project managers should continually motivate their team by providing challenges and opportunities, by providing timely feedback and support as needed, and by recognizing and rewarding good performance PMI (2013). The focus of the PMBOK has always been on the hard skills deemed necessary for managing projects. They have a set of guide lines in each designated knowledge area consisting of inputs, tools and outputs. However, they also convey the skills that is necessary project managers need to develop to adequately develop their teams. These skills can be viewed more as the soft skills that are necessary for successful team building.

Conclusion

The authors state, to achieve project success, is to enhance understanding and awareness of what is involved with the project, maintaining understanding to all changes relating to scope, monitor progress, keep stakeholders informed, and having effective teamwork (pg 661). This

article stressed how project management standards and practices have developed to help improve

in project success. Project managers focus more on critical success factors and do not always

equally apply their time and efforts across the knowledge areas. There are certain people

orientated tasks and processes such has procurement, risk, and stakeholder management that do

not get as much attention.

I do not have tangible project management experience. From what I have learned

through this program and related articles, it makes sense that if we apply these project

management principles and standards throughout the duration of the project, our chances of

success go up. Through previous course work, and taking different leadership and managerial

assessments, I am more people orientated. That does not mean that I believe in putting people or

my team above tasks, objectives and deliverables. I just try to cultivate trust and a positive work

environment for myself, my team and my stakeholders. Team building, and developing the

people-orientated processes, equally across the project spectrum, I feel, will promote

opportunity, develop morale and meet objective and goals within a project life cycle.

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