COMPETENCIES OF AN EFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGER

By

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to identify the competencies of an effective project manager. In doing this, previous literature on the subject matter is thoroughly reviewed and synthesised to collate these competencies. Literature review revealed competencies of an effective project manager to include leadership competencies and technical competencies. There are five leadership styles (Muller & Turner, 2010) and fifteen dimensions of leadership (Muller & Turner, 2010). Leadership competency encompasses the dynamics of systems thinking in light of intellectual qualities, emotional qualities and managerial qualities. This paper proposes a possible relation amongst the elements of these leadership competencies. Technical competencies identified from literature review, in conjunction with the Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBoK), include scope, scheduling, risk, health and safety, communication, information, procurement management, value addition, and the management of the iron triangle of cost time and quality. From these analyses, the paper sums up the key competencies of an effective project manager and briefly explains the relevance of each competence in project management.

Introduction

Effective project managers are said to possess certain qualities that enables them to perform optimally and to achieve set goals on any given project. These qualities come in the form of competences and acquired or thought skills. This paper focuses on the project management competencies of knowledge, behaviours and attributes that ensure that a project manager effective on projects.

Competencies are characteristics and attributes of individuals (Dulewicz, 2005). A project manager is more effective if his/her individual competencies are in line with the proposed project (Muller & Turner, 2010). On this premise, whether project managers are born groomed or made is highly debatable. Competency is defined in the PMBoK as capacities and attributes that project managers should possess in order to realise projects aims and objectives. These are largely in the form of personal characteristics and knowledge that project managers bring to meritoriously manage personnel on the projects and to improve projects outcomes. As this is based on individuals, Barber (2004) opines that attributes, such as attitude, are immeasurable and hence are subjective. The project management institute has outlined key competencies that a project manager should possess to ensure effectiveness on projects. The PMBoK suggests measuring knowledge competencies based on nine key areas of Scope Management, Procurement

Management, Human Resource Management, Communication Management, Integration Management, Risk Management and the iron triangle.

Other authors opine that competency is the capability to apply certain skills and knowledge to effectively perform tasks in a given environment (Pant & Baroudi, 2008). Other recognised professional bodies such as Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) concur that leadership skills is key to project management.

This paper will address the competencies of an effective project manager under two categories of leadership competencies and technical competencies.

1.1 Aim and objective(s)

The intended aim of this paper is to:

Identify and explain the competencies of an effective project manager.

And the objective is to outline the key competencies of an effective project manager.

2. Literature Review

Experts on the subject of project management are of a common consensus that there are competencies that should be possessed by project managers to ensure success on projects. According to research, competence is a combination of skills, knowledge and individual characteristics (Boyatzis, 1982 Crawford 2003). However, these competencies are grouped under different umbrellas by different authors despite being generally similar. Furthermore, authors such as Thomas (2008) are of the opinion that competencies are measurable, while authors such as Barber (2004) are of the opinion that the measure of competency level is highly subjective due to individual variance. Mengel (2008) collated these competencies as emotional, managerial and intellectual competencies. Emotional competencies are necessary requirements in the management of staffs and teams in utilising their technical competencies in performing allocated project tasks to client's satisfaction (managerial competencies) (Pant & Baroudi, 2008). According to Omidvar (2011), technical competencies are fundamental attributes possessed by any effective project management. Omidvar explains his claim on the basis that technical competency defines a project managers knowledge and understanding of the various processes involved in project execution (Omidvar, 2011).

Some of these technical and leadership competencies are integral of the knowledge based competencies outlined in the PMBoK. Authors have varying opinions regarding the constituents of leadership competencies. The most pronounced of these being Goleman's (1995) account of six leadership styles and Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) claim of up to fifteen leadership dimensions. For the purposes of this paper, leadership competencies will include emotional qualities, managerial qualities, intellectual qualities and dynamic systems thinking skills.

2.1 Leadership Competencies

Leadership competency is defined as the ability to organise and rally support of team members in achieving project objective and goals (Muller & Turner, 2010).
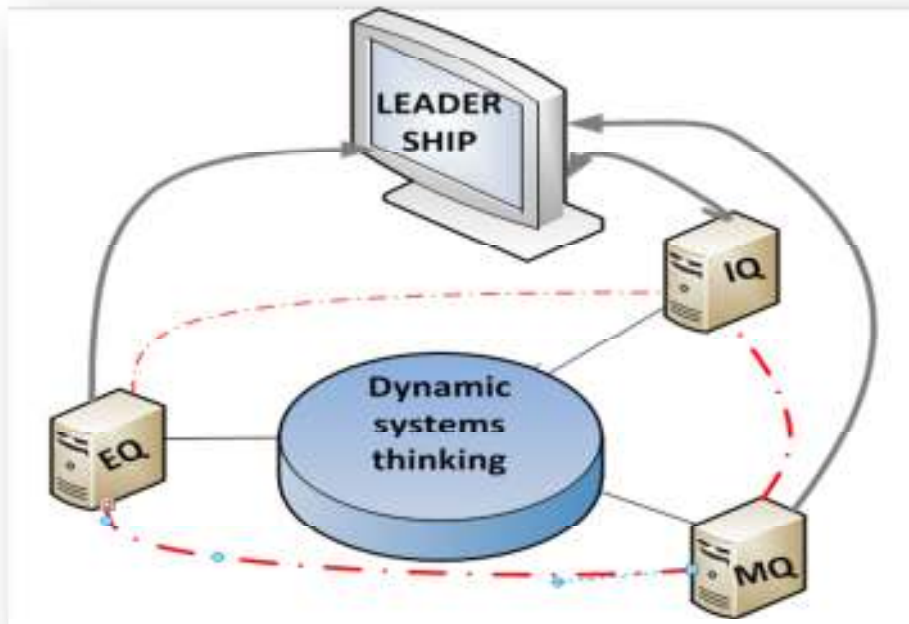

Figure 1 Constituents of leadership

2.1.1 Intellectual Quality

Intellectual quality refers to one's ability to comprehend and gain an in-depth understanding of concepts (Muller & Turner, 2010). This process of comprehension can be enhanced through dynamic systems thinking by establishing the cause, effect and interrelations of elements on any given project. Systems thinking is a holistic way of problem solving through careful analysis of interrelations amongst all the element on a project. According to Dulewicz and Higgs (2005), leadership competence, in view of intellectual quality, has three main components:

- Critical analysis and judgement: This is regarded as the ability critically analyse information gathered from different sources. This analysis includes investigating and questioning facts while identifying the advantages and disadvantages so as to make an informed decision to aid risk mitigation.
- Strategic perspective: This refers to one's ability to identify the framework and boundaries of any given project and its implications thereof. This component further refers to foresight assessment of risks and opportunities on the project.
- Vision and Imagination: This refers to one's sense of direction and ability to foreseen consequential effects of decisions being made on the project.

2.1.2   Managerial Quality

Managerial quality refers to the ability to effectively coordinate the project team in delivering project deliverables timeously and in accordance with client's requirements. Lampel (2001) explains this under the umbrella of relational competency and opines that a project manager is effective when he/she is able to manage relations with team members and steers them to perform of tasks. Hartman (2008) emphasizes the need to be dynamic in management, using systems thinking in identify project management strategies rather than following an old prescription (Hartman, 2008). Additionally, Martina (2012), is of the opinion that learning through feedback and action learning enhance managerial qualities and minimise the possibility litigation (Patanaku & Milosevic, 2008). Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) identified five core areas that require managerial attention on projects. These have been condensed to four, and briefly explained below.

- Empowering and Developing: This refers to the ability to motivate and encourage team members to efficiently perform.
- Communication: This refers to the ability to engage with and relay relevant information to all stakeholders.
- Resource management: This refers to the ability to coordinate and manage resources availed to the project.
- Achieving: This refers to the ability to persevere throughout the project and to achieve the prescribed project objectives.

2.1.3   Emotional Quality

This quality refers to a project manager's ability to be empathetic and relate with other team members on the project. Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) identified seven dimensions of this emotional quality. They outlined these as emotional resilience, intuitiveness, self-awareness, influence, motivation, conscientiousness and interpersonal sensitivity.

2.2   Technical Competencies

Most authors define technical competencies in line with the prescription of the PMBoK with the only variation being the placement of resource management. Resource management is sometimes identified as a leadership competency under managerial qualities considering that personnel on the project is also classified as resources (Dulewicz, 2005). Technical competency refers to the ability to strategically and effectively manage risks and resources with direct or indirect effect on the iron triangle (Bredin, 2008).This includes the ability to compile, handover and understand the prescribed processes involved in project execution (Barber, 2004). Traditionally, the assessment of technical competencies was solely based on cost, time and quality. Currently, however, other dimensions such as risk mitigation and value addition on projects have been tugged to the forefront of technical competencies (Bredin, 2008).

PMBoK outlines technical competencies to include scope management, procurement management, resource management, risk management, health and safety management, cost, time and quality management. Authors such as Patanaku and Milosevic (2008) expanded this list to include scheduling management, information management and

handover management. The variations in technical competencies are based on the fact that it is largely project dependant. Despite these differences, the importance of technical competencies on projects is indisputable (Omidvar, 2011).

3. Conclusion & Learning

This paper has addressed the objectives outlined in the introduction and summed that the competencies of an effective project manager can be categorised under the umbrellas of leadership competencies and technical competencies. This conclusion is drawn from literature review and PMBoK. Constituents of leadership competencies are identified to include intellectual, managerial and emotional qualities. It is further explained in this paper that the dynamics of systems thinking has an added advantage on project management if used as an aid in management. From this analysis, a relationship is illustrated linking managerial, intellectual and emotional qualities with systems thinking as a core link to the three dimensions of leadership competencies. Technical competencies are identified to include elements of project execution such as procurement, scope, communication, resource, risk, cost, time, quality and health and safety management. It can be concluded from the findings that a successful project manager should have a balanced knowledge and possess both technical and leadership competencies. The core emphasis is laid on leadership competencies on the premise that, a project manager can be trained and be equipped with the required technical knowledge, which is often project specific.

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Natasha Afi Narh was born in Ghana where she completed her primary education. She then relocated to Zimbabwe to attend Arundel Secondary School for her secondary education. Ms Narh holds a degree in Construction Studies and another in Quantity Surveying from the University of Cape Town where she is currently pursuing a Master in Engineering Management and Systems Thinking. Ms Narh is affiliated with the Green Building Council of South Africa and is a Green Star Accredited Professional aiming to steer on sustainability and effective management in the industry.