

Let's Cure "The Dumbing-Down Of Project Management"

© 2006 by Stacy A. Goff; Vice President, *asapm*, President, ProjectExperts

Executive Overview

In too many Enterprises, the last 20 years has seen the practice and prestige of Project Management lose ground, rather than gain ground. We are in an era when the most effective Enterprises leverage the power of Project Management to its maximum in achieving their Visions and Strategies. The others have Executive groups who too-often perceive PM to be just "*something those folks down in IT do*".

What are the forces that have caused so many otherwise-successful Enterprises to ignore or fail to reap the benefits of effective Project Management? Perhaps we should look at our record and practices, and the conflicting forces and faces we present to our stakeholders. That is the purpose of this article.

A Manager's Complaint

This article is based on a quote from a Conference Attendee who is frustrated with the apparent direction of PM. She did not think this "dumbing-down" *should* happen: She said we need effective Project Managers more than ever, but many forces appear to be working against us, rather than in our favor.

I attended a number of PM-related Conferences this year, speaking at some, and staffing booths at others. All were targeted at the two-or-three management levels just below the Executive Suite. The refrain was consistent; the Manager I cite above has put her finger on a problem that we must solve, before we have any hope of engaging Enterprise Executives in harnessing our potential.

My Perspective and Background

The perspective from which I write began with 15 years experience in what used to be called Data Processing. In that time, I moved from Programmer to Systems Analyst, to Project Manager, to Manager.

As a Manager, I became the user of many of the systems my staff and I had created. That experience gave me a completely different perspective of the purpose and success of all those projects.

As a Project Management Consultant since 1982, I have worked with stellar Project and Program Managers in Aerospace, Defense, Pharmaceutical, Consultancies, Government agencies and Financial organizations. Each year, 40%-50% of my work is with Information Technology organizations, including helping them implement consistent methodologies for estimating and managing projects.

The Way We Were

In the 1960's and 1970's, Project Management was a revered practice and Project and Program Managers were a rare and respected breed. Typically coming from Engineering or Construction disciplines, they accomplished wonders such as landing Man on the Moon (and returning!), and building ever-greater buildings, bridges and dams.

Data Processing (DP) Project Management, a skill of increasing need as projects became increasingly complex, was often taught or instilled by a handful of companies such as IBM, that not only had classes in the subject, but also provided Systems Engineers, who served as coaches for their clients to assure that the training got out of the classroom and into the workplace. I literally learned from the great ones.

Why PM Today Appears Dumb

Today, whether it is Information Technology, Construction or Aerospace projects, ask any Executive about her or his perception of Project Managers and you are likely to hear some of the following refrain:

- ◆ Too Often Late and Over Budget
- ◆ Over-Promise and Under-Deliver
- ◆ Unreliable Estimates, Constantly Changing
- ◆ Poor Communication, Too Late to Help
- ◆ Great Risk For the Enterprise
- ◆ Unacceptable Results
- ◆ Non-Aligned to Enterprise Strategy

And then you'll hear of failed efforts: The Big Dig; the Denver Airport Baggage System; the FBI, IRS and other huge System and Engineering failures.

Root Cause Analysis

While Information Technology continues to get a bad rap, all Project Managers are at risk. And many of the problems come from Societal changes, market pressures, or short-term business practices.

Several of the root causes that have contributed to the perception-shift over the last 20 years, include:

- ◆ Increasing Complexity of Projects
- ◆ De-Skilling of the Enterprise
- ◆ Vastly Increasing Complexity of Solutions
- ◆ Cost-Containment vs. Investment Mentality
- ◆ Reduced Trust and Commitment by Executives
- ◆ Reliance on Heroics, rather than Competence

As we teach in our Problem-Analysis module, *Problems* are often the result of multiple interacting *Causes*, which collide to create each Problem event. And, one can prevent the problem in the future by removing any one interacting cause. Further, one difference between effective project teams and less-effective ones is whether they understand all the *Causes*, or just the obvious ones.

Of course it does not help to identify Root Causes if you do not have the power to correct them. But perhaps there are steps we could take if we understood a few of the **issues** we *could* resolve.

Core Issues

There are a handful of core issues that today's competent Project Managers are addressing. They include factors that are important to individuals, to Enterprises, and to Society. Those issues include:

- ◆ Demonstrating Management *and* Leadership
- ◆ Joining Accountability *and* Authority
- ◆ Prioritization: What's *Most* Important
- ◆ Getting Consistency of Process
- ◆ Traceability of Scope and Estimates
- ◆ Improving Reliability of Plans
- ◆ Moving From Knowledge to Competence
- ◆ Failure to Succeed

Given time and support, the Project Managers who are working on these and other areas will succeed. Thus the gap widens between Competent Project Enterprises and those that are not. We'll discuss each of these Issues as areas of opportunity.

Demonstrating Management *and* Leadership

Bennis, Kotter and others have already done a great job of noting the distinctions between Management and Leadership. Yet Project Management is the practice where the distinction is least-often appreciated. For many years, we called Project Managers with no influence project leaders (note the lower-case). This suggested they survived based on their native skills; or they did not.

At the same time, true Leadership is one of those dreaded (at least for Engineers) "soft skills". There are many mentions of the "Management" processes in PM literature, but few explicit directions for developing the equally necessary Project Leadership processes, skills and competences—outside of International Project Management Association's ICB, the IPMA Competence Baseline, and *asapm's* NCB.

Competent Project Enterprises not only identify the Project Leadership processes, but also identify stakeholders who should help deliver them, and how much of their time they should require. Thus, the Leadership responsibilities and time commitments are part of the PM Plan in these enterprises.

Joining Accountability *and* Authority

Ah, yes, the old "responsibility without authority" issue has been around for decades. And yet today it is worse than ever. An effective Project Charter's purpose is to help the Project Manager get or tap the authority to succeed. Today we are seeing lengthy but severely weakened Charters, some of which an Executive never sees, and a Sponsor never signs.

And it goes beyond the Charter. Project Managers may be responsible for managing Project Costs, but have no influence on the Budget, no hiring authority, and are often subject to Purchasing's own timeline. We have no control over which skilled (or not) resources are placed on the project, not to mention that their availability is quarter-time, rather than full time. Of course, a Competent Project Manager who encountered that situation would try to *correct* it.

The same lack of authority often applies for Project Time, when in addition to the above constraints, **deadlines** are assigned before one even knows the Project Scope. On Time and Within Budget? **Hah!**

Prioritization: What's *Most Important*

The third Issue to address for those who would be Competent Project Enterprises is that of effective Portfolio Prioritization. We still see too many organizations that try to run twice as many projects as they can effectively staff, each project with half or less the resources they require. Some actually call this “*Doing More With Less*”, but if they had any relevant metrics, they would quickly see that they are “*Doing Much Less With Less*”.

And it is not just the Prioritization that is key. Given the priorities, appropriate staff (Human Resources), with the right skills, the right availability, and the right additional people replacing them for their other workplace commitments. Even when we see most of these success-factors met, we rarely see that last one fully satisfied.

So far, to the reader, these may appear to be *excuses*, blaming any lack of project performance upon Executive Management. *Au Contraire*: Gaps in these areas are the direct result of lack of PM Competence by the Project Manager and key Stakeholders, such as Sponsors and Resource Managers. This lack of PM Competence is curable, if caught in time.

Improving Reliability of Plans

Executive Management in any Enterprise is brilliant in managing the business processes, to the extent that quarterly returns are measured in tenths of a percent, compared to plan. And then there are projects, which all too often harbor uncontrollable surprises. And it is not just Information Technology projects that have this problem.

In addition to the project failings cited above, look at Chicago's Millennium Park. Originally scheduled to be completed in 2000, it was finally done last year—5 years beyond planned date, at more than twice its budget. And Construction projects are usually “tighter” on their targets than IT projects.

Many factors cause plans to change, but an important consideration is whether the product of the project is “hard” or “soft”. It was Putnam who showed us in the 80's with the Rayleigh Curve, that most Information Technology projects have about the amount of predictability of a Research and Development project—little to none, with low reliability.

So how does the hard vs. soft product relate to the Millennium Park? It was the creative, soft aspect of the design and integration of the Bandstand that was the villain—the intended highlight of the park. Bottom line: predictability is less with soft products.

Another factor in the reliability of the Project Plan is when that plan is established and committed. IT (not to pick on IT but it is an area rich with examples) is one of the few Project Practice Areas where most enterprises commit to a timeline and a budget before they even know the solution Requirements. Clearly another case of PM Incompetence.

Some Executives over-react, by placing tight deadlines and budgets on their Project Managers—not realizing that this action usually increases Time and Cost, and assures the Quality and Scope will be inadequate to meet the Business Need. Once again, *Doing Much Less with Less*.

Executive incompetence? No way! Executive frustration is more like it, and yet another reason why some Executives disdain Project Management as “*something those folks down in IT do*”. Your remedy for this Issue: increase PM Competence in developing a realistic project plan, and then learn how to deliver to it. And when you won't deliver, learn how and when to communicate that fact.

Traceability of Scope and Estimates

Part of increasing the reliability of plans is to have clearer measures of Project Scope, from project inspiration and Portfolio Prioritization, all the way through Project Closure. And having those measures also goes a long way toward maintaining credibility with Executives and other Stakeholders when Scope does invariably change.

Some application areas of Project Management have much clearer Scope measures, and this traceability is much easier to maintain—even when other factors, such as the skill and competence of the team members in their assigned efforts also vary.

Information Technology has some fairly good Scope measures for Development projects—but few for Infrastructure projects. Today, Infrastructure can represent the majority of a Project's Scope! Clearly, there is an opportunity for PM Competence here!

Traceability of Scope and Estimates, cont'd.

Traceability of Scope is a great start. Then given accurate tracking and project history, Competent Project Enterprises maintain history databases that pin down not just the cost of Scope delivery, but the impact of all the other variables, such as correct stakeholder involvement and skill-levels, that affect Plan vs. Actual Effort, Cost, Duration and Quality.

Whether these databases are based on Barry Boehm's IT COCOMO II model or other tools, Competent PMs show their Managers and Executives the trade-offs in *all* the key variables that affect project performance. In the 1980's, one of the most successful Defense contractors used this approach not only to estimate for bidding purposes, but to also estimate the way their competition would, based on prior experience—thus winning contracts.

Getting Consistency of Process

You may not have noticed, but, we started with Issues that involve the Executive level, and are now down to the Project Organization level. Perhaps in resolving these issues, you may wish to work from the bottom-up. Resolving this issue and the preceding one will serve you well in improving the rest.

Most Project Processes (or Methodologies) are not scaleable; a few are. And very few are Universal. For example, an Information Technology methodology needs to deal with issues that a Construction (or Defense) methodology never will. Thus considering size and application area, a Competent Project Enterprise has one of two solutions:

- a. Use a high-level method that it is good for Portfolio reporting roll-up purposes, but does not provide detailed guidance for practitioners.
- b. Use an array of methods that relate to the range of sizes and practice areas in which the Enterprise is engaged; all methods have structural similarities for roll-up purposes, but varying depth and complexity, based on project needs.

A third, ineffective, solution, that some Enterprises apply, is to require everyone to use a monolithic method, that creates more resistance than support.

Why is Consistency of Process important? We're afraid many project teams don't have a clue where they are in their current project. Of course, many

do—it is just their Managers who don't know, because the team uses a different framework, life span or method for each project. So that Manager just keeps giving more assignments, hoping the team will let him or her know when they have too much.

Consistency of Process helps Resource Managers to plan resource requirements. From Portfolio through Closure, certain key resources must be available or the project results will suffer. Portfolio Resource Management is impossible without either a crystal ball or consistency of process.

Consistency of Process also helps in staged approval processes. One reason Managers and Executives have such fits about project budgets and schedules is because it seems we are always asking for more. Given consistent process, we should be able to track the trajectory of these indicators at each major Milestone or Stage Gate, and compare them to the history for similar projects. Thus we can reduce the perception that we are flying "out of control" (even when we are).

Another benefit of consistency: Lessons Recorded have the potential to be truly applied and Learned. Some Enterprises "learn" the same lessons about the right amount of the right Customer involvement during Requirements (for example) in every project.

Yes, I know that quote about consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds. Google that, though, and you will see that Emerson's full quote starts: "a foolish consistency..." Yet another argument for PM Competence, because it takes more skill, insight and experience to use any methodology intelligently, than it does to use it blindly or foolishly.

Failure to Succeed

The popular old saying, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail" is nice phrasing, and is definitely relevant to today's Project Managers. This topic evokes the fact that you must identify what success "looks like" to you, your Manager, your Executives, and your Stakeholders. Then get these perceptions aligned. Otherwise, you are once again (sorry) demonstrating a shortfall of PM Competence.

There are two dimensions to Success Criteria: Success of the Project, and Success for the Enterprise.

Failure to Succeed, cont'd

The ultimate measure of a project's success is how stakeholders evaluate it once it is complete—the Success for the Enterprise criteria. See more about this in *asapm*'s National Competence Baseline, in Element, 2.1 Project Success Criteria.

Yet often too much emphasis is placed *during the project* upon what we call the Success of the Project criteria. These should include the above Enterprise criteria, but because they are hard to measure during the project, and such factors as Time and Cost are easy to measure, we sub-optimize project performance. We have written two other articles probing this issue, both published on the *asapm* website.

[Prioritize Vital Signs to Manage Expectations](#)

Executive Summary: less effective Project Managers manage the factors that are easy to measure, rather than those that are most important to project stakeholders. Then they wonder why they get sub-optimal results. Start the project with agreement about the relative importance of each of the factors by using this exercise. Then goal-seek to optimize your performance in the top-priority items, and use your flexibility in the lower-priority items to meet stakeholder expectations.

[Project Levers and Gauges](#)

Executive Summary: Government and Enterprises are trying to do more with less. Faster and Cheaper is an attractive theme, but can result in poor project performance without agreement about the priorities, and competent Project Managers to achieve them. This article points out the flaws of mistakenly attempting to control project indicators, and the benefits of more effectively managing the project levers, so Project Managers and teams achieve their targets.

Moving From Knowledge to Competence

Some people don't know the difference between Knowledge and Competence. Others do, but focus on definitions and formula retention, rather than on Skills, applying the right Behavioral Attributes, growing Competence, and demonstrating PM Performance. ProjectExperts' work in this area is just one of many valid views of the differences; we presented it at the 2006 IPMA Shanghai World Congress: [Distinguishing PM Competence in Training and Development, Assessment and Certification.](#)

Why is this important, especially in the context of “the Dumbing-Down of Project Management”?

Knowledge-based certifications in PM, including *asapm*'s IPMA Level-D Certified Project Practitioner, are a great foundation in the practice of PM. They help assure that practitioners have a common vocabulary, have consistent application of key formulae, and can form the launching pad for progression into our prescribed higher levels of PM Skills, Attributes, Competence and Performance.

But, successful as they are, there exists the expectation that a knowledge based certification should improve project performance. We believe they are a great start, and even the process of preparing for an exam can improve short-term benefits, but one must continue the progression to see Performance results.

And yet, what do Executive Managers want? They don't want (or care about) certified Project Managers at *any* level: They want project results. And they are frustrated at not getting them, when most of the rest of their Enterprise is running just as expected. Why are projects so “special”, they wonder?

We've caused this problem ourselves: the truth is, none of the knowledge-based certifications certify the applicant **as** Project Managers. Instead, they certify knowledge **in** Project Management—a subtle difference to some, but huge as it relates to performance. That is why *asapm* is adapting the IPMA 4-Level Competence-based PM Certification system.

With our efforts, and given recent efforts by others to move into Competence-based certification of Project and Program Managers, we can master the competence to deliver to Executive expectations.

Summary: Curing the PM Dumb Perception

Let us go back to the Root Causes that we believe have contributed to **Today's Perception** that Project Management has suffered Dumbing-Down:

- ◆ Increasing Complexity of Projects
- ◆ De-Skilling of the Enterprise
- ◆ Vastly Increasing Complexity of Solutions
- ◆ Cost-Containment vs. Investment Mentality
- ◆ Reduced Trust and Commitment by Executives
- ◆ Reliance on Heroics, rather than Competence

Summary, cont'd

We can see that most of these are Society-level or Enterprise-level Root Causes. Few Project Managers can directly address and cure them--at least, not in the short term. We are stuck with them.

We do not believe we are seeing “the Dumbing-Down of Project Management”. Instead, we are experiencing the consequences of our practice’s failure to stay ahead or gain ground in keeping up with the changes in the root causes mentioned previously.

We are also in a position of heightened expectations and visibility. Enterprises increasingly rely on projects today: that marks a significant change from “the good old days” of the 1970’s. In many Enterprises, Projects represent the majority of the work.

And each well-publicized project failure (as in politics, the successes don’t get as much coverage) paints us as a practice that is out of control—to the extent that where 20 years ago Project Management was the stepping-stone to the Executive suite, today in some Enterprises it is the kiss of career death.

What we have done in this article is to point out the areas where Project Managers, our Managers, Executives and Stakeholders of Competent Project Enterprises have made progress, and others can also do so. Note that the actions we identify are *not* a complete list; they are merely a sample from our experience. We could list more actions that would also help any organization improve its PM Competence.

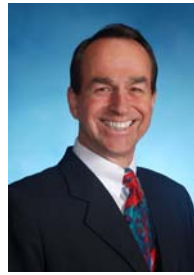
This writer feels that Competent Project Managers are the most valuable resource in any Enterprise that embraces change. It is not Executive Management’s problem that there is the perception that PM is just “*something those folks down in IT do*”.

Instead, given that Project Management is the practice of effective organizational change, both the problem and the opportunity lies with us, to paraphrase:

“Project Manager, heal thyself.”

Note: Citations provided on request

About the Author



STACY A. GOFF is president of ProjectExperts®, a Project Management consulting, tools and training company. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he can improve Enterprise or workgroup project management competence, productivity, timeliness and effectiveness.

An insightful consultant and dynamic speaker, Mr. Goff provides project consulting services and presents workshops of great interest to executives, managers, project managers and leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors.

His methods support any organization’s quest for more effective Project Management, from better cost and time control, to more consistent processes for regulatory requirements, to improved quality of project results. He has published THE Guide, a project management methodology for Information Technology projects, MinProj®, an enterprise-wide Minimum Project Management method, and The Small Project Guide, a universal Small Project Management approach.

His Project Management tools and methods have been used by Enterprises, Government Agencies and Consultancies on five continents. His Project Management Competence Model is the centerpiece for many Project Oriented Enterprise’s professional development programs.

Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Project Management training, coaching and consulting. His passion for strategic fit, and excitement for results translate to high-quality, on-time, in budget project performance. In his workshops or in coaching or consulting, he combines his insights into project management with sensitivity for the human aspects of projects. **The result:** Measurably increased project success.

Note: This article is available in a 1-hour dinner-meeting topic or for Enterprise presentation.

Email: stacy@projectexperts.com