This chapter is taken from *Business Driven Information Technology: Answers to 100 Critical Questions for Every Manager* by David Laube (ed.) and Ray Zammuto (ed.). It was sponsored by The College of Business at the University of Colorado, Denver. Published September 2003 by Stanford Press.

Each chapter in the book is a response to a question. This chapter answers the question, "***Why is it important to explicitly state the intended business result of an IT project? How should this be done***?" Please note – what is expressed in this chapter is true not only of IT projects, but also of strategic initiatives.

Question 96: What are the key managerial authorities a project manager needs to succeed?

William W. Casey

A classic bromide of business is that *there can be no accountability without commensurate authority*. The logic is self-evident, but the sticking point for managers has been to translate each side of that equation into clear and actionable terms. An earlier discussion (**Q92**) addressed accountability, showing that a project manager's basic accountability is to achieve the project's measure of performance. Is such a clear statement of managerial authority also possible? This answer attempts to do so after first establishing whether the issue is worth bothering about.

Should Project Managers Have Authority?

Harold Kerzner, a prolific writer on project management, echoes many of his colleagues when he states, "Project managers have very little real authority."[1] He and similar writers do not contend that project managers should not have authority, only that it is a fact that they do not have it. Their resulting prescription is that project managers should learn to deal with it and not expect the situation to change. This thinking is sufficiently prevalent that a small industry of books and seminars has arisen to teach project managers how to influence without authority. Fortunately, Kerzner's statement does not apply everywhere. At many companies project managers do have authority. Indeed, much of their success is credited to it.

One dramatic example of the importance of the authorities possessed by project managers is found in a study comparing two companies, Honda and General Motors. Each company had set out to design a new automotive platform. Honda achieved its goals handily, but General Motors fell spectacularly short, nearly doubling its targeted schedule and costs. Researchers found the pivotal distinction to be in the authority conferred upon the project manager.[2] Honda's project manager had as much authority as any divisional head; General Motors' project manager was practically powerless. Other studies have yielded similar results.[3]

I have conducted informal research on the same topic. In over 200 seminars presented to project managers, each seminar participant has been asked to recall two or three projects and represent them as data points on a two-dimensional chart indicating (1) project success (admittedly subjective) and (2) number of authorities granted the project manager—from a list of four to be described in a moment. Data from each seminar participant are then summarized on a single chart for the entire class.

Without exception, the data points have clustered as shown in Figure 1, with very few outliers. The conclusion is that a strong correlation exists between the number of authorities possessed by a project manager and the success of the project. A slightly more aggressive conclusion is that the *absence of project manager authority poses a significant risk to project success*. However, it is an atypical project risk: one of the few that can be prevented without additional cost, delays, or compromises.

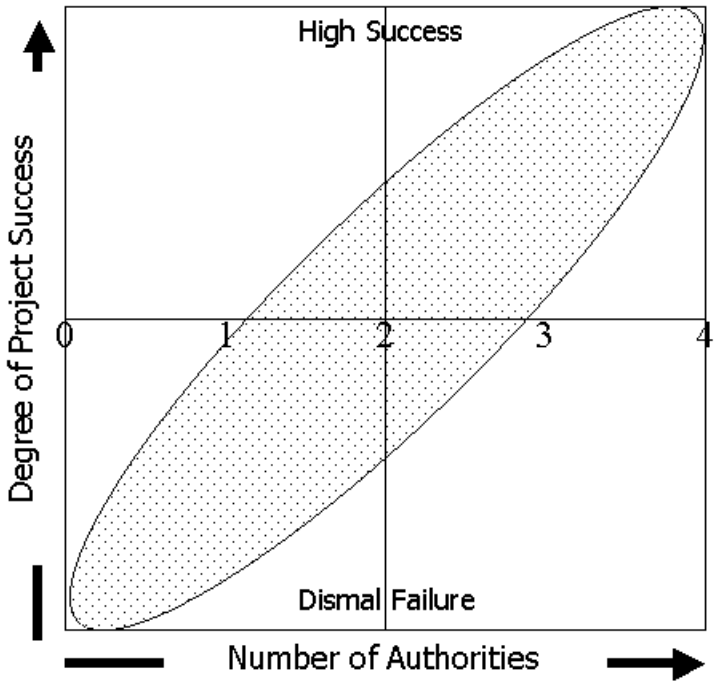

Figure 96.1 - Relationship between project manager authorities and project success

Managerial Authorities

It is apparent that managers require authorities. Some of the authorities required vary, based on the demands of the situation. Authorities to negotiate contracts, control budget, decide the technical approach, etc. are not universally applicable. However, one situational demand does not vary—the accountability for the outputs of others. This is the fundamental managerial accountability.[4] A simple set of managerial authorities may be derived by considering what authorities a project manager (or any manager) might reasonably desire to fulfill that accountability. One researcher calls the four authorities described below the "requisite authorities," as no manager can manage effectively without them.[5]

The First Two Authorities

First, a project manager might say “If you are going to hold me accountable for the output of my team, then let me have some control over who is on that team.” In such a case, the manager must be authorized to:

1. Select new team members
2. Remove team members

Of course, these two authorities must exist within the bounds of reality. Just as a department store manager has to work within the constraints of budget, personnel policies, and a limited labor pool, the project manger will have to do the same. If the project needs a C++ programmer and the IT department has only one available, the project manager will probably be forced to choose that programmer. The absence of authority is felt, however, when there is a pool of programmers from which to choose, and the project manager has no say in who is chosen. At a bare minimum, any project manager should be able to veto the appointment of team members.

As with other managers, project managers should be bound by the routine and necessary requirements of coaching, counseling, etc., prior to removing someone from the team. But if coaching and counseling do not result in a performance improvement, a project manager should not be told, “You two work it out!” Enjoining project managers to communicate, to persuade, and to lead is fair enough, but insufficient. Other managers are also thus enjoined, but they are also authorized.

The Last Two Authorities

Having gained the ability to influence team membership, a project manager might then request to have influence over individual performance. This means the project manager must be authorized to:

3. assign tasks,

4. provide performance consequences.

The third authority may seem obvious, but enough project managers have heard, “You can’t tell me what to do,” that it is worth stating.

The fourth authority allows project managers to give weight to their assignments literally, to make them matters of consequence. Without this authority, team member commitments may not be realized. In practice, consequence control may mean anything from allocating bonuses or giving time-off to writing a portion of each team member’s appraisal.

Instead of consequence control, executives often bestow the authority to tattle, “If you have any problems with your team, let me know about it and I’ll take care of it.” Although the intended support is commendable, and consequences from executives are certainly better than no consequences at all, this approach generally works less well. One project manager described it as trying to fight a skirmish armed only with nuclear warheads. One exception is that it may make sense to employ “tattle authority” when project team members are of higher rank than the project manager.

The complications encountered when managing cross-functional and matrix situations are discussed in another answer (**Q97**).

Refusal to Use Authority

What if project managers will not use the authorities they have been granted? This is a common complaint of project executives. Usually, this problem derives from one of two causes:

1. The project manager is not truly being held accountable for project success.

When that happens, then the controlling factor will be the project manager's social relationships with members of the project team.

2. The project executive has failed to formally identify the project manager's authorities (**Q93**). The authorities, therefore, exist mainly in that executive's mind.

Summary

Evidence weighs heavily that project managers do, indeed, succeed more often when accorded ordinary managerial authorities. Authorities requisite to all managers, including project managers, are the authorities to:

1. select new team members
2. remove team members
3. assign tasks
4. provide rewards (and other performance consequences).

Resources

Web Based Resources

CIO.com: Leadership and Management Research Center.

<http://www.cio.com/research/leadership>.

Articles

Hartman, Francis, and Rafi A. Ashrafi. "Project Management in the Information Systems and Information Technologies Industries." Project Management Journal 33.3 (2002): 5-15.

Books

Graham, Robert J., and Randall L. Englund. Creating an Environment for Successful

Projects: The Quest to Manage Project Management. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. 124-27.

Jaques, Elliott. Requisite Organization: A Total System for Effective Managerial Organization and Managerial Leadership for the 21st Century. 2nd rev. ed. Arlington: Cason Hall, 1998.

Womack, James P., Daniel T. Jones, and Daniel Roos. The Machine That Changed the World: The Story of Lean Production. New York: HarperPerennial, 1991.

Yourdon, Edward. Death March: The Complete Software Developer's Guide to Surviving Mission Impossible Projects. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997.

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[1] Harold Kerzner, Applied Project Management: Best Practices on Implementation (New York: Wiley, 2000) 310.

[2] James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones, and Daniel Roos, The Machine That Changed the World: The Story of Lean Production (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991) Chapter Five.

[3] Robert J. Graham and Randall L. Englund, Creating an Environment for Successful Projects: The Quest to Manage Project Management (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) 122, 126.

[4] Elliott Jaques, Requisite Organization: A Total System for Effective Managerial Organization and Managerial Leadership for the 21st Century, 2nd rev. ed. (Arlington: Cason Hall, 1998) 35.

[5] Jaques.