



Shouche, S 2008, 'Ethical project management', Paper presented at *PMI® Global Congress 2008—Asia Pacific*, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

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Ethical project management

CONFERENCE PAPER | Ethics | 3 March 2008

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How to cite this article:

Shouche, S. (2008). Ethical project management. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2008—Asia Pacific, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

Abstract

Ethical responsibilities of a project manager as defined in the PMI guidelines focus a lot on “black and white” issues, such as conflict of interest. While all that is very well, a trained and certified project manager is also duty bound to do whatever is in the best interest of the project at all times. Every too often, we find project managers who are otherwise on the correct side of the guidelines display one or more of the following symptoms:

- Not pulling their weight on projects, allowing them to drift, abdicating all responsibility to the sponsors and senior managers.
- Accepting their brief as doing only coordination and clerical work, not really driving projects.
- Being too willing to accept whims and fancies of the most influential or most vocal stakeholders allowing them to hijack projects.
- Failing to report the true picture to all stakeholders.

This paper talks about a number of scenarios when a project manager's judgment about what is right or wrong is called into question. In so doing, we shall try to extend the definition of professional responsibility of a project manager.

The “Correct” Project Reports

Even within the parameters of being factually correct, project status or progress reports could be any of the following:

- Pessimistic: Being conservative in recognizing progress, much like revenue and expense recognition in accounting.
- Optimistic: Very common, as all project managers like to give the impression of being on top of things and keep everybody in good cheer.
- Factual: Just present plain facts and figures and leave judgment and interpretations to the reader. This is most tempting, but really an “escape mechanism” because I believe the project manager is shirking responsibility here.

Then there is the issue about how much of the truth should be revealed. Should the customer be informed about a week's delay in an intermediate milestone? Should the team be informed about an impending paradigm shift in project objectives as soon as it becomes apparent? I once had a boss who always want to brush some risks under the carpet for fear of annoying customers or sponsors. He always assured me that he would address the issue and that it will all come together. Would I have been right to listen to him or should I have gone ahead and report what I knew was the truth?

Projects have a significant impact on the fortunes of companies and project reports are often as important as accounting statements that depict the financial health of an organization. Just as there are standards like the Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP), shouldn't there be guidelines for how project reports should be created? I believe the project manager's professional responsibility should include the following:

- Establish the standards and parameters of reporting and let everybody know in advance. For instance, a 10% schedule slippage means a project status automatically becomes RED. This is not just a “best practice” but an ethical responsibility. How else would stakeholders know how to interpret reports?
- Strive to be as accurate as possible in reporting figures. If approximations are used, it should be clearly stated.
- Do not succumb to pressures to suppress facts or stating falsehoods and half-truths, even if it comes from your boss.
- Within limits of reason and materiality, always try to provide early visibility of issues and risks and provide mitigation plans. Things do not go away just by ignoring them.

Protect the Interests of “All” Stakeholders

Paraphrasing a famous quote, “all stakeholders are equal, but some are more equal than the others”! Stakeholder management calls for the project manager to master the art of diplomacy. For instance, can the interests of a “project-affected” person be as important as that of your boss? Is the customer really “always right” even if he or she is demanding that your team work 60-hour weeks to meet an unreasonable deadline? If there is a conflict of views, who do you go with?

It is very tempting for project managers to take the easy way out and listen to the most influential stakeholders—be it customers, your superiors, or the sponsors. But if you have been trained to assess stakeholder needs and handle conflicts, really a project manager should play a more “proactive” role. I believe a project manager’s professional responsibility should include the following:

- Establish and document each stakeholder’s interest in a project and set trade-offs and boundary conditions in advance if possible.
- Ensure transparency and honesty in determining the impact of key decisions on all stakeholders.
- Try to use negotiation and conflict resolution techniques to reach the optimum decision involving all stakeholders (never let decisions get taken by “default” assuming the other side would never know).

Remaining “Objective”

In a typical project, a project manager has to deal with teams and individuals whose jobs are adversarial by nature. For example the “development” team in a software development project, whose job it is to write error-free code and the “test” team, whose job is to find defects in code. Project managers often knowingly or unknowingly become “biased” toward one team over the other. To carry the above example further, a project manager who has been a developer in the past would tend to favour developers over testers. This can potentially lead to bad decisions and cause incalculable harm to the project.

It is easy enough to comprehend in theory, but often very difficult to implement in practice, when factors like past experiences, personal relationships, long-held beliefs, etc. come into play.

I believe the professional responsibility of a project manager should include the following:

- Not “taking sides” in technical discussions. Once you are an “insider” it is very difficult to regain your objectivity.
- It is important not just to be objective but to also appear to be so, just as Caesar’s wife must be above suspicion. Something as simple as hanging out with one group all the time can give the impression that the project manager is biased. So protocol is important in the life of a project manager.

Get Leaders to “Act” for the Project’s Benefit

By “leaders” we mean senior management, superiors, or sponsors, or all of these. Project managers need their support to be successful. But leaders are often too busy or simply not equipped to understand what the project needs from them. Especially in times of crises and key decision points, project managers must make sure they provide leaders with the right information and motivation to act in the best interest of the projects.

Here are some examples of when a project manager must engage the leaders actively and get them to act.

- When unreasonable demands are made of the project team by the business or the customer or other stakeholders. It is the leader’s responsibility to ensure that the goals of a project are “feasible.” Project managers often kill themselves and their teams chasing goals that are not realistic in the first place.
- When important stakeholders are refusing to play along. It is the leadership’s responsibility to ensure that the project manager gets the necessary cooperation from everybody. Project managers should employ various means to secure this cooperation, but it is not his responsibility alone.
- When changes threaten to overwhelm the project goals. A project manager is responsible for “managing” change, but needs help from leadership to protect it from “unnecessary” change.
- All projects depend upon somebody to provide for the necessary infrastructure and help overcome roadblocks in setting this up. A project manager is responsible for managing the dependencies, but there will always be situations when somebody you are depending upon does not have your task at the top of his or her priority list. Project managers are often made to run around in circles and left to fend for themselves. One must know when to blow the whistle and ask for help.

Too many project managers feel it is a failure on their part to escalate things to the leaders. It is not so. A certified Project Management Professional (PMP) knows better than most other project managers that he or she must be “proactive” and not escalate unnecessarily. That does not mean he or she has to do everything alone. If there are some things that the leaders must do—a project manager must tell them that—often in a “no-nonsense” fashion. If project managers don’t get leaders to “act” for their projects, he or she will have failed in protecting professional responsibility toward the projects.

Get the Right Level of Authority

A project manager is responsible and accountable for the success of the projects. But responsibility without authority calls for super-human qualities from the project manager and is unfair. It is a project manager’s professional duty to ensure that he or she is empowered enough to carry out all duties. If this is not automatically bestowed upon him or her, he or she must ask for it.

Here are some examples of empowerment a project manager absolutely must have:

- The authority to insist upon a clear charter and to seek clarifications from time to time.
- The authority to refuse a change without a compromise on either the cost, scope, time, or quality variables.
- The signing authority to procure the required resources for a project within the approved budget. This includes the authority to select the project team.
- Authority to ask for detailed project plans from all contributing teams and to be able to influence the plans.
- The authority to ask for the metrics necessary to keep projects on track from the project team and functional managers.

- Access to senior management of the project for any escalations.

A project led by a dummy project manager or a project manager just doing coordination work is doomed to fail. I therefore believe that a project manager is ethically bound to ask for such authority before signing up for a project.

Accepting and Assigning Responsibility

A project manager is ethically bound to accept responsibility for a project's success or failure. It does not mean that he or she "alone" is responsible. To be accountable and to be able to hold others accountable is a very important aspect of influencing project outcomes and learning from them and it is the project manager's job to assign responsibility where necessary.

A project manager has the responsibility to look for the real root causes and try to resolve them. This requires open, frank and honest communication and a project manager must promote that culture. He or she must accept responsibility as well as be prepared to assign responsibility without fear or favour. For example, if senior management or sponsors needed to do something differently, they must be told so as clearly as possible.

Project progress or closure meetings often beat around the bush without ever getting to the point. Nobody wants to end the project on a sour note, so the discussions will be sugar-coated and covered in a nostalgic hue. It is unfortunate, and a loss of a valuable learning opportunity.

Use the "Right" Process

I often come across project managers; even PMPs who say that what they learn is fine in theory, but never works in practice. Not only do I believe it can work in practice, it is indeed the project manager's responsibility to the profession to make it work.

For example, if the risk management practices in a project are missing or inadequate, the project manager must insist on bringing in the best process. If change management is weak, he or she must bring his or her knowledge to bear in introducing this to the team.

There will always be resistance to change. "We have always done it this way," "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" are some comments that you will encounter. But if you are committed to the success of your project and you think you know something that will make things better, you should show the courage of conviction to bring about the change. It might require you to ruffle feathers, appear like a lone crusader at times, but if you have changed something for the better in the end, it will all be worth it. And you may very well end up with a halo around your head as the pioneer who brought good things to your organization.

Not pulling their weight putting good processes in place is tantamount to shirking responsibility. I consider it as a project manager not doing his or her job.

Help Other Project Managers

This is indeed one of the responsibilities mentioned in the PMI code of ethics. Unfortunately for most people, this is often confined to "gathering the requisite number of PDUs."

Project management is an important occupation that contributes to building organizations, communities, and nations. Helping the profession is not just a noble cause that must be done in spare time, but an ethical responsibility that a project manager must strongly identify with.

Here are some ways a project manager can help fellow project managers:

- Be a mentor to budding project managers by doing any or all of the following:
 - o Going "out-of-the-way" to help them acquire the skills and the methods that they need in their profession.
 - o Explaining to them the importance of certification, studying and "networking."
 - o Acting as a consultant when they face problems and need advice.
- Participate in voluntary activities involving practicing or budding project managers.
- Help espouse the cause of project management in their organizations in any or all of the following ways.
 - o Building good job profiles and career progression tracks for project managers.
 - o Selling the value of project management in whatever way they can.

Helping the profession grow will help you grow in stature as well. If you haven't done it yet, try it—you may be surprised at the return on investment (ROI).

Conclusions

Some of the specific recommendations stated here may be up for debate. But it is my belief that they represent ethical dilemmas as much as they do management trade-offs. A project manager true to his or her profession has to be capable of making the "right" choices in these situations, rather than simply plump for the most "convenient" or non-controversial option. And the right choice has to be dictated by the professional knowledge that the project manager has acquired.

If the project manager shirks this responsibility, it would be a disservice to the profession and the project management fraternity. Giving more specific guidance about project management best practices and trying to make it a part of a project manager's DNA is very important.

References

PMI Code of ethics. Online version retrieved from: www.pmi.org/PDF/ap_pmicodeofethics.pdf

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Originally published as a part of 2008 PMI Global Congress Proceedings – Sydney, Australia

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