

Superior Project Managers

Is there a core set of behaviours that determine a superior project manager?

Researchers Alicia Aitken and Lynn Crawford of Bond University in Australia think there might be. They reason that effective project management is as much about demonstrating appropriate behaviours as it is about applying project-management skills.

To date, however, most research has relied on the opinions of project managers themselves. Aitken and Crawford recently completed a project in which they instead surveyed senior managers to determine how they would rate 32 personality dimensions and 20 behavioural competencies of the most successful project managers they had encountered.

Crawford defines competence as a combination of knowledge, skills, experience, demonstrable performance and personal competence, which includes attitudes, motivation, behaviours and personality characteristics.

“While the perceptions of senior managers may not always accurately assess competence, their perceptions do have a significant influence on project managers’ career paths, the development of a project culture within organizations, and the recruitment of new project managers,” says Crawford. “That’s why we felt their perceptions warranted a more in-depth understanding.”

The researchers created a web-based questionnaire. Forty supervisors of project managers from 11 organizations around the world completed it.

According to the data collected, a majority of senior managers consistently found that effective project managers display the following personality characteristics:

- Conscientious – sticks to deadlines, completes jobs, perseveres with routine, and likes fixed schedules
- Vigorous – thrives on activity, likes to keep busy, enjoys having a lot to do
- Controlling – takes charge, directs, manages, organizes, and supervises others
- Socially confident – comfortable with strangers and likes to put others at ease
- Evaluative – critically evaluates information, looks for potential limitations, and focuses upon errors

- Behavioural – analyses thoughts and action, psychologically minded, and likes to understand people
- Persuasive – enjoys selling, changes opinions of others, convinces with arguments, and negotiates

Less important characteristics were:

- Independent-minded – has strong views, difficult to manage, speaks up, and argues
- Conventional – preserves well-proven methods, prefers the orthodox, disciplined and conventional
- Modest – reserved about achievements and avoids talking about self
- Conceptual – theoretical, intellectually curious, and enjoys the complex and abstract concepts
- Worrying – worries when things go wrong, keyed-up before special events, and anxious to perform.

Still, notes Crawford, “the variation in the ratings suggests that there is no single personality profile for an effective project manager.”

In fact, a high level of statistical deviation among certain responses indicates a wide range of disagreement about the importance of the following traits:

- Relaxed – calm, relaxed, cool under pressure, free from anxiety and can switch off
- Emotionally controlled – restrained in showing emotions, keeps feelings back and avoids outbursts
- Worrying – worries when things go wrong, keyed-up before special events and anxious to perform
- Adaptable – changes behaviour to suit the situation and adapts approach to different people
- Innovative – generates ideas, shows ingenuity, and thinks up solutions
- Modest – reserved about achievements and avoids talking about self

- Trusting – trusts people, sees others as reliable and honest, and believes what others say.

Interestingly, says Aitken, there was considerably more consistency among the ratings for behavioural competencies than for personality characteristics. The most important behavioural competencies deemed essential to a superior-performing project manager were:

- Planning and Organizing
- Delivering Results and Meeting Customer Expectations
- Deciding and initiating action
- Leading and supervising
- Persuading and influencing

Given all of our results, says Crawford, the following are some of the behaviours *expected* of project managers:

- Identifying and organizing resources needed to accomplish tasks
- Consistently achieving project goals
- Taking responsibility for actions, projects and goals
- Initiating and generating activity
- Delegating work appropriately and fairly
- Gaining clear agreement and commitment from others by persuading convincing and negotiating

The research project also delivered one unexpected revelation: “The higher the perceived level of an organization’s project-management maturity, the lower they rated the personality characteristic of ‘*conventional*’,” says Aitken. “We thought that as organizations become more mature in their project- management practices they would require less scope for trying new approaches and that there would be more emphasis on people conforming to established work methods.”

“Our results, however, indicate that these organizations do value project managers who can identify unconventional approaches and find new ways of implementing projects.”

SOURCE:

Aitken, A. and Crawford, L.H. (2008) Senior Management Perceptions of Effective Project Manager Behavior: An exploration of a core set of behaviors for superior project managers. In: *Proceedings of PMI Research Conference, Warsaw, Newtown Square, PA*: Project Management Institute

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