Let's Cure "The Dumbing-Down Of Project Management"
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Executive Overview
In too many Enterprises, the last 25 years has seen the practice and prestige of Project Management lose ground, rather than gain ground. We are now in an era when the most effective Enterprises leverage the power of Project Management (PM) to its maximum in achieving their Visions and Strategies. The others have Executive teams that too-often perceive PM to be just *"something those folks down there 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 the PM 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 began with a complaint of a conference attendee who was 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.

We attended a dozen PM-related Conferences that year, speaking at most, and participating in others. All targeted from Project Managers through the Executive Suite. The feedback was consistent; the Manager we cite above has put her finger on a problem that we must solve, before we have any hope of engaging reluctant Enterprise Executives in harnessing the untapped potential of Project Management.

My Perspective and Background
The perspective from which I write began with 15 years of experience in Information Systems (now IT) projects. In that era, I moved from Developer to 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, nearly half my work is with Information Technology organizations, and it includes helping them implement consistent methodologies for estimating and managing projects.

The Way We Were
In the 1960s and 1970s, 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, nuclear power plants, and dams.

Information Systems Project Management, a skill of increasing need as projects became increasingly complex, was often taught or instilled by a handful of companies, that not only offered 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. We literally learned from the great ones.

Why Does PM Today Appear to be 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 refrains:

- Too Often Late and Over Budget
- Over-Promised and Under-Delivered
- Unreliable Estimates, Constantly Changing
- Poor Communication, Too Late to Help
- Great Risk For the Enterprise
- Unacceptable or Incomplete Results
- Not-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-focused business practices.

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

- Increasing Complexity of Projects
- De-Skilling of the Enterprise
- Vastly Increasing Complexity of Solutions
- A Cost-Containment vs. an Investment Mentality
- Reduced Trust and Commitment by Executives
- Reliance on Heroics, rather than Competence
- Hopeful exhortations to "do more with less"

As we teach in our Problem-Analysis module, *Problems* are often the consequence of multiple interacting *Causes*, which interact 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 may not help to identify Root Causes if you do not have (or cannot get) 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 most competent Project Managers are addressing. Those include factors that are important to individuals, to Enterprises, and to Society. These issues include:

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

Given time and support, Project Managers and teams who work on these and other issues will thrive. Thus the gap widens between Competent Project Enterprises and those that are not, yet. 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 key distinctions between Management and Leadership. Yet Project Management is the most-important 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 interpersonal skills; or they did not.

At the same time, true Leadership is one of those dreaded (for Engineers and others) "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. That is changing, as other professional associations begin to 'catch up.'

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, while their availability is quarter-time, rather than the required 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 lead 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 having half or fewer of the resources they require. Some actually call this *"Doing More With Less,"* but if they had any relevant (honest) 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, they assign appropriate staff (Talent), with the right skills, with the right availability. They also appoint the right additional people to replace them for their other workplace commitments. Even when we see most of the needed 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, including Sponsors and Resource Managers. And this lack of PM Competence is curable, if caught in time.

Improving Reliability of Plans

Executive Management in any Enterprise can be brilliant in managing the business processes, to the extent they can measure quarterly returns to 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; most projects can.

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 in 2005—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 a key consideration is whether the product of the project is "hard" or "soft." It was Putnam who showed this in the 1970s with the Rayleigh Curve; 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 the timing of establishing and committing to that plan. 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 Project Time and Cost. It also assures that the Quality and Scope will be inadequate to meet the Business Need. Once again, *Doing Much Less with Less*.

Is this 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 there 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 Closure, and Benefit Realization. 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 good Scope measures for Development projects—but few for Infrastructure projects. Today, Infrastructure can represent the majority of an IT Project's Scope! Clearly, there is an opportunity for increased 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 1980s, our customers, 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.

Improving 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 might consider working from the bottom-up. Resolving this issue and the preceding one will serve you well in improving the rest.

Most Project Processes (often named 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 at least 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? Because we too often find that 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 have a clue about true status, because each team uses a different framework, life cycle or method for each project. So those Managers just keep giving each team more assignments, hoping the team will let him or her know when they have too much to do.

Consistency of Process helps Resource Managers to plan and manage resource requirements. From Portfolio through Closure, certain key resources must be available in each stage 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 fits about project budgets and schedules is because it seems teams 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 teams 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, we 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 IPMA-USA'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 our 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. It shows 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 IPMA-USA's IPMA Level-D® and PMI's PMP®, are a good starting-point for the practice of PM. They help practitioners with a common vocabulary, and application of formulae. They can be a launching pad for progression into the 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. They can be a good start, and the process of preparing for an exam could possibly improve short-term benefits, but one must continue the progression to see Performance results.

After all, 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 the rest of their Enterprise is running just as expected. Why are projects so "special," they wonder?

We in PM have caused this problem ourselves: the truth is, none of the knowledge-based certifications certify the applicant as Project Managers. Instead, they certify memorized knowledge about Project Management—a subtle difference, but huge as it relates to performance. That is why the PM world is moving to Competence-based PM Certification; first from IPMA, and then with all others following.

With our efforts (and now, recent efforts by others) to offer Competence-based certification of Project and Program Managers, you can master the PM Performance to deliver to Executive expectations.

Summary: Curing the Dumb PM Perception

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

- Increasing Complexity of Projects
- De-Skilling of the Enterprise
- Vastly Increasing Complexity of Solutions
- Cost-Containment vs. an Investment Mentality
- Reduced Trust and Commitment by Executives
- Reliance on Heroics, rather than Competence
- Hopeful exhortations to "do more with less"

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 previously-mentioned changes in root causes.

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 efforts.

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 25 years ago serving as Project Manager was a 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 knows that Competent Project Managers are the most valuable resource in any Enterprise that embraces change. It is not Executive Management's fault that they have the perception that PM is just "something those folks down there do."

Instead, it is the fault of some of our professional associations, greedy, quick-fix certification preparation providers, lazy trainers, and ignorant talent procurement professionals. And most of all, it is the fault of those of us who know better, and have been unsuccessful in converting the rest of us to more professional practices . Given that Project Management is the practice of effective Enterprise change, both the problem and the opportunity for change lies with us; so, to paraphrase: "Project Manager, heal thyself."

About the Author

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A co-founder and past president of IPMA-USA, Stacy has been an officer in IPMA®, the International Project Management Association. In 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow. As well, he has contributed to the success of Project Management Institute since 1983, helping developing new standards, writing book chapters and articles, speaking at conferences and webinars, and co-founding a chapter.

A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and PM consultant since 1982, he improves Enterprise or project team PM competence, efficiency, and Performance. Mr. Goff speaks at industry events, offers coaching and consulting services, and presents workshops of great interest to Executives, Managers, Project Managers and leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors.

His Project Management tools and methods are used by Government Agencies, Enterprises, Consultancies, and individuals on six continents. He combines his PM Process insights with wide-ranging experience in projects and programs, and with sensitivity for the human aspects of projects.

The result: Measurably increased **PM Per4mance, Personal, Project, Program, and Portfolio Performance**. Email: stacy@projectexperts.com