Theoretical Approach Regarding the Bases of Success and Reasons that May Lead to Failure in Project Management

by

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Abstract. The present paper work deals with theoretical concepts regarding the reasons that may lead to a project’s failure or success. The primary aim of the work paper is to help readers to get a view of conceptualizations of project management and its phases, while providing an opportunity to see the interferences of factors that may determine project’s success. This work paper also contains some aspects regarding key-factors and elements that may assure a good management of projects. The present subject was chosen because -in authors’ opinion- the ability to demonstrate yourself as a cooperative, contributing, and constructive project manager is critical for long-term career success in any domain.

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1 Introduction

Regardless of the field to which we refer to, today -more than ever- we can easily identify items related to project management, which has emerged as a way of planning, organizing, implementing, coordinating and control activities which are more or less complex and which belong to different areas of activity: industrial, political, social, commercial, cultural etc. Currently, any activity is seen as a project, and involves the activity of following some specific steps in order to correspond to the needs and necessities of an individual. Without realizing it, each of us -in daily life- is a real project manager, having to manage and coordinate large and small projects - such as, for example, organization of a party, planning winter skiing holidays, finding a new job or even just prepare a special dinner.

Coordination of a project may seem, at first sight, a difficult task, somewhat specialized, requiring a certain type of experience, knowledge and skills. It may seem, also, a difficult challenge. However, as noted above, any of us is -in some way- during daily life, a true project manager. It is true at the same time that the projects people are working within their organization are more much complex and require a higher level of knowledge and skills in order to be conceived.

Knowing the fact that project management is done by using a particular process in which management’s basic functions can be found (Fig. 1), but also the fact that it is impossible to talk about projects -especially on projects with external financing- without inserting them into a relationship with two other elements (Fig. 2): policy (or policies) and program (or programs).

In order to be successful, a well thought out and structured project should be directly related to development policy priorities at national and European level. In other words, the objectives of the projects which require external funding
from the European Union will have to respond and contribute to national and, implicitly, to EU policies. This applies to projects proposed both by government actors and private (firms, companies).

2 Issues that can be perceived as key-elements which assure success in project management

Generally speaking, a project might be considered as being a failure when it does not deliver what previously has been required, in line with expectations. Therefore, in order to succeed, a project must deliver to quality, to cost and on time the benefits presented in the business case. What we do have to mention is the fact that the requirements for success are not clear and absolute, considering that the project must be delivered in line with expectations.

It is a sure fact that in order to identify the factors which represent the basis of a project’s failure, it has to be known that any project – either a complex or a simple one- depends on three key-factors, which can be perceived as being the elements which lead a project to success; we are talking about top management support (because without full commitment from this level, when several problems will arise on a project, this will collapse), leadership (because people work together in order to reach a common goal) and a well-structured development methodology (because the proper attention given to processes and requirements are essential in order to reach success) – Fig. 3.

Considering this, in order to identify the main factors which can lead to a project’s failure, it is also necessary to identify factors on which interdependence’s depends the success of a project. Having in mind the fact that Cost, Time, Quality and Risks are major elements that have to be respected and permanently controlled in order to achieve success, we decide that this have to be perceived as being the interdependent factors which, together with management support, leadership and well-developed and structured methodology, assure the success of any project (Fig. 4).

When approaching issues that may represent the bases of success in project management, there have also to be remembered the competences possessed by the project manager. In according to International Project Management Association, the eye of competence (Fig. 5) represents the integration of all elements of project management as seen through the eyes of the project manager when evaluating a specific situation.
Considering the fact that “competence” is a keyword, the authors considered that a definition of this term should be mentioned: it represents the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and/or skills and, where relevant, demonstrated personal attributes; it also has to be mentioned that it does not measure or predict the future; it evaluates the past and present knowledge and experience of an individual based on the evidence he/she shows.

The Eye of competence represents, through its elements, clarity and vision. In a detailed version (Fig. 6), the Eye of competence is divided into three main parts:

- **Technical competences** – which involves 20 technical competence elements that deal with the project management matter;
- **Behavioral competences** – which contains 15 behavioral competence elements that deal with the personal relationships between the individuals and groups managed in the projects;
- **Contextual competences** – which contains 11 contextual competence elements that deal with the interaction of the project team within the context of the project.

For a better understanding of the difference between “competence” and “competence elements”, we should mention that the second remembered represent competence ranges which represents mainly dimensions that together describe the function and are more or less important; each range contains competence elements that cover the most important competence aspects in the particular range. Every competence element in each range is described in terms of the knowledge and experience required. There are 46 competence elements (Fig. 6).

All these have been said, we can affirm that project success and failure is not just about facts, nor it is simply about what was delivered. It is, first of all, about how the entire project is perceived.

### 3 Reasons why a project can fail

Having mentioned the factors which can lead to a project’s success, is now easier for us to identify and mention the factors that contribute to a project’s failure. The next image (Fig. 5) identifies several reasons which can represent the basis from which a project can go wrong.

We consider that project failure is due, usually, because an entire amount of factors that interact, so there is no one overriding factor that causes project failure. Perhaps in a particular project failure processes got worse rather than better, maybe they were cancelled because of cost overruns, or perhaps methodology was not respected and initial schedule was ignored. In most of cases, people consider that the reason of failure is obvious, even if the definition of “failure” is not always clear: one project with a significant delay might be described as a failure.
but, at the same time, another project – with a similar delay, might be seen as a stunning success.

Concentrating on factors that may lead to a project’s failure, we would mention (not in a specific order) – Fig. 7:

1) Poor communication – because communication is critical on projects. Considering that people use to favour processes and tools over individuals and interaction. Without communication, nothing can guarantee creativity, competence and team spirit – issues necessaries for the success of a project. We include here both communication between the member of the team, but also communication with the beneficiaries of the project; also, it is important communication between the partners involved in the same project and, above all, it is important the way of communicating with the others: every person involved in communicational process has to be honest and good-intended, otherwise things can go wrong. Another communication breakdown can be mentioned as being language constrains: the agreed communication language both verbal and written has to be known by all parties involved, in order to avoid the inconvenience of language barriers and misinterpretation of conversations;

![Figure 7. Overview of the reasons that may lead to a project’s failure](http://www.projectmagazine.com/project-management-general/84-practical-project-management/340-why-projects-fail-the-devil-is-in-the-detail)

2) Project organisation and lack of leadership – people are, without doubt, every organisation’ and/or project’s most valuable and perishable resources; they demand to be managed and their management is usually the biggest challenge to project success (Berkun, 2005). Usually, when roles, tasks, requirements and responsibilities are not allocated according to individual skills, strengths, expertise and expectancies – but on their position in the organisation or other irrelevant criteria–, the entire process of communication fails, leadership becomes only a well-known theoretical concept and, finally, the entire project will collapse; as Larsen says, “a motivated team in which all members are equally involved and can rely on each other is a key factor for success” (Larsen, 2004). Considering this, it is a sure fact that team building, organizational behaviour and leadership are key-factors that can lead to reaching success;

3) Inappropriate staff and lack of team spirit – it is a sure fact that project teams come with a wild range of personalities and, usually, it is not easy to work in a pleasant manner with all team members. Because of this, the project manager needs to check always how the request have been received by subordinators and whether or not that particular person who received a specific task has or not the skill, the will or the desire to fulfil the task at the desired standard;

4) Inadequate resources – we should mention here both human and material resources, considering the fact that for any business endeavour to success it must be blessed with the right amount of resources at an acceptable level of quality and skills (Hitchin and Ross, 1994); because managing any kind of projects requires both organisational and technical skills, the capability of dealing with new processes, standards and procedures, but also the opening to
change, the manager of the project has to be sensitive to the impact of this factors; in this way, even the project manager himself, as a person, can be perceived as a factor which can lead to a project’s failure or to a project’s success;

5) **Insufficient resources**— a project depends not only on adequate resources—both human and material, but also on the right amount of them; if in order to develop a project there are not enough resources, then a project can easy fail;

6) **Issue regarding quality control**— because delivering bad products/services to customer represents one of the most rapid ways to failure; the entire team that develops a project has to be sure that they will provide a quality production in the end;

7) **Inflexibility**— because many of the members involved in a project management team rather follow a plan than respond to change. This probably happens because of the ritual of believing in invariable plans. Taking into account what Dwight D. Eisenhower said, [...] in preparing for a battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable, we do consider that everybody should embrace change;

8) **Poor project specification**— without a clear understanding of what the project entails, it often appears misunderstandings and question marks which can lead to endless disagreements; many disputes took place because of contracts being unclear about the development methodology or because contract articles were interpreted in different ways;

9) **Unclear roles and responsibilities**;

10) **Unrealistic timescales and timeframes**— for example, because of an inadequate planning of the activities that have to be done, all the relevant aspects of the project can be ignored and not taken into account, resulting in unrealistic target dates being set. Some of the factors that cause delaying and obstruct the ability of maintaining initial schedules are the underestimation of the amount of work that has to be performed, the underestimation of the requirements of the projects up front— which usually leads to an inappropriate solution offered, the identification of project activities was not easy and the time required for their accomplishment was too short, the approval of specifications took longer than was specified or expected etc.;

11) **Failure to manage user expectations**— usually happens when members of the team are not focused on their tasks or when management’s attention is shifted away from primary project performance factors; in this case, if the “new focus” is different than error detection, prevention or even mitigation, usually things take a different turn and time will be spent on wrestling with disputes over culpability than on processes and deliverables;

12) **Lack of involvement**— people usually underestimate the value of participating in the project management process; some of them usually tend to play a passive role in the projects, limiting their involvement and responsibility to the implementation and delivery of the expected results;

13) **Requirements**;

14) **Complexity**— procedures can be ambiguous and not clear at certain deliverables acceptance standards stages;

15) **Use of external consultants**— even if this can be regarded as a strength, we have to mention that the steering committees and top management do not always understand well the depth of the changes required and senior executives are rarely concerned themselves with the details of the projects; on one hand, the consultants can cause several delays to the project (because they require a lot of time in order to analyse management requirements and to come up with their own solutions); on the other hand, time
and costs were not analysed and scheduled, so the project has also to suffer, not only to gain by using external consultants;

16) **Insisting on perfection** – as it is said, “the devil is in the detail”; if there is a great tendency by some highly ranked members of the project to insist on identifying every conceivable risk and controlling all possible deficiencies, there might be took in the account the fact that activities have to respect a proper schedule. By keeping being blocked in details, people will cause delays, fact which will represent an important wickness for the project. This is due to the fact that people find it easier to imagine the concrete and emphasise the technical aspects rather than the abstract, organisational aspects;

17) **Risk management** – which represents the ability to recognize a threat, accurately assess its implications and develop approaches to mitigate the risk in a cost-effective manner (Crouhy at al., 2001) it is also an important factor that may lead to project’s failure;

18) **Unfavourable Public Opinion** – it is not commonly to encounter projects that are contrary to public opinion, but we identified this issue as being one of the factors that may lead to a project’s failure;

19) **No correspondence with the necessities of the beneficiaries** – if a project is developed, it has to accomplish and fulfil its beneficiaries needs or necessities; if the final result of the entire project that is going to be developed does not fulfil one of the needs that beneficiaries confront, then is no reason for the project to be developed and, in this way, it represent a failure from the very beginning;

20) **Unreached mission, purpose and objectives** – if a project does not reach its goal, then it can be considered as being a failure.

### 4 Conclusions

Even if project management is a research topic on which is much literature written about, there were not identified the proper factors which surely lead to success or failure. It is a sure fact that a conglomerate of elements may lead and help to reach success, but is necessary to mention that people represent the entire soul of an organization.

Talking about projects, human resources used are essential in order to fulfil the requirements and to reach success. That is why many factors which can contribute to a project’s failure are generally connected with human resources: lack of leadership or of team spirit, inadequate amount of human resources or inadequate expertise/strengths/education/experience/skills/expectancies of team members can transform a well-perceived project in a real failure. More than that, as a project manager, it is necessary to focus on individuals and interaction, fit-to-use results over extensive documentation, customer collaboration and on responding to change, considering that specialists in domain perceive everything else as an optional mean.

Last but not least, we would like to mention the fact that it must be remembered that project management is first and foremost a philosophy of management, not an elaborate set of tools and techniques. It will only be as effective as the people who use it. (Tim Bryce)

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