Alignment at the Top: A Case Study Investigating This Critical Factor in Project Implementation

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Abstract: Research examining quality management has focused primarily on manufacturing organizations with specific attention directed toward organizational employees. Many in the field of quality believe that management is key for a successful quality program; yet, the effects of specific leadership styles on quality performance have not been determined. In this study, leadership styles within transformational, transactional, and non-transactional classifications are evaluated relative to the organization's performance based on the criteria from the Baldrige Quality Award. Results indicate that leadership does have an affect on quality, and certain transformational and transactional styles are more effective.

Keywords: Barriers, Leadership, Project Managers, Scope, Sponsor

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The project approach is quickly becoming a critical method of accomplishing work today. Increasingly, organizations are required to organize so that complex, nonroutine, one-time efforts limited by time, budget, resources, and performance specifications designed to meet customer needs can be accomplished (Gray and Larson, 2003). The reasons behind the increase in projects are many, including increasing global competition, faster product cycles, and the increasing currency of projects. The result has been the need for organizations to improve their management of projects, and thus, the advent of project management as a technical area requiring knowledge and training, including research into identifying the key factors impacting project efficiency and success.

This case study investigated one critical factor in project management—the impact that top management has on project success. The setting was a federal agency with technical expertise in managing large, multi-year technical projects. The study was initiated to better understand barriers to project implementation success. The agency had invested large amounts of time and money in project management training. Project management tools and techniques were being used. Project managers had high levels of skill and experience. Projects had scope documents with supporting signatures of high ranking managers. Quarterly progress meetings were being conducted between top management and project management. But even with all of this, the projects were struggling in implementation. There was anecdotal evidence expressed as rumblings in the ranks that suggested that even though all parties had agreed to the project scopes, there was still misalignment at the top of the organization. This study was commissioned to investigate this situation and present findings to the program manager (with responsibilities for multiple projects).

Project Success Factors
Many projects do not meet expectations in typical project success criteria: schedule, budget, and performance criteria. So even though there is an increasing need for projects, many projects fail to meet all expectations. This situation has created opportunities to study what key factors influence project success. Youker (1999) found that factors that contribute to unsuccessful project management include: lack of support from key stakeholders, lack of skilled professionals, an unshared vision, lack of team commitment, lacking specific project plans, communication issues, conflict, and unclear line of project authority. Brown (1999) determined the factors to be: resistance to change, lack of a team culture, and an inability of team members to work with others outside of their area. Giegerich (2002) found barriers to project management to include: design problems, cash flow issues, capacity changes, unacceptable quality of work, lack of management involvement, lack of teamwork, lack of effective communication, and conflict. Slevin (1987), however, concluded that there are other barriers not previously mentioned including: lack of monitoring and feedback, which is needed at each stage in the implementation process; lack of communication, which is necessary to and between all key actors in the implementation process; and lack of troubleshooting, which is the ability to handle unexpected crises as well as deviations from the original plan. Consistent across studies is the negative impact of lack of support by key stakeholders and management, including top management (Pinto and Slevin, 1988). This support can be achieved either directly between top management and the project manager or project team. Another approach is to use a linking pin role between project teams and top management to create and maintain alignment. This role is usually performed by a project sponsor—a high-ranking manager who endorses and lends political support for the initiation and completion of the project (Gray and Larson, 2003).

Several studies have found the most frequently mentioned factor impacting project success to be a poorly defined scope (Gobeli and Larson, 1986; Pinto and Slevin, 1988).

In the organization being studied, projects had sponsors and well-defined scopes that were developed and approved by top management. Problems developed with top management during implementation, putting project success at risk. Because well-defined scope documents were in place, the focus of this study was how well the role of project sponsor was being executed. Exhibit 1 summarizes the factors associated with project success

Exhibit 1. Project Success Factors

Top Management Interaction
Project Vision/Scope Alignment
Project Sponsorship

Project Team Characteristics
Skills
Commitment
Planning
Communications
Conflict Resolution
Feedback Mechanisms
Team Culture
Authority Clarity

Other Factors
Resistance to Change
Stakeholder Support
Organizational Culture
Inter-organizational Interaction

Project Results
Schedule
Budget
Performance Criteria
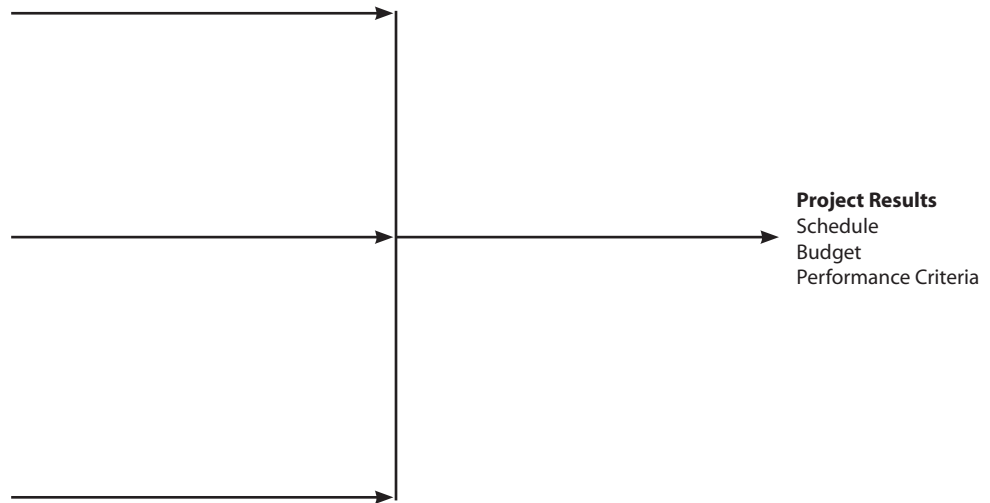
in the literature, showing project sponsorship, the focus of this study, in the upper group.

Research Design
Research Setting
The study was conducted in one division of a large federal agency. At the time of the study the agency had been in operation more than 50 years and had more than 3,000 employees. The agency is focused on large, technically complex projects involving multiple stakeholders with project life cycles of 5–10 years, and multimillion-dollar budgets. Concurrent projects are the norm. At the time of the study, many project managers were struggling through project implementation. Informal anecdotal data provided by the project managers suggested that the roles of project sponsors and executives were a key issue. Project managers reported to a program manager with responsibility for coordinating resources across projects and ensuring projects delivered expected project success criteria. The program manager initiated this study to investigate the impact of top management (project sponsors and executives) on project success.

Research Instrument
Two data collection mechanisms were used for this study. A 6-point Likert-type survey was constructed with 12 questions concerning the project sponsor and executive roles. Participants were asked to respond to statements by indicating how strongly they felt about each statement. Possible responses included strongly disagree, disagree, tend to disagree, tend to agree, agree, strongly agree, or NA (not applicable). Short definitions of roles were provided with the survey to enable participants to be consistent in their definition of a role. The survey defined the two roles of interest as follows:

- Sponsor: A manager who has been *formally assigned* (as designated in the project scope) to oversee project initiation, development, and implementation. Typically, these are high-level managers.
- Executive: The highest level of management within the organization—senior vice president or president.

In addition to the Likert-type questions concerning roles, participants were asked to evaluate 10 potential risks to project success. The risk factors were an alternative way of investigating the issues being experienced during project implementation and to give priority to the issues. The participants were asked to allocate 100 points across the 10 risk areas, giving more points to larger risks. The findings from the risk assessment would indicate whether alignment was a key issue relative to the other risk areas. The roles survey investigated whether an alignment issue existed and the risk assessment evaluated how important alignment was relative to other risks being experienced during implementation.

Findings
A total of 110 employees were asked to complete the anonymous survey. A total of 36 surveys were completed and returned. Employees with different roles relating to projects participated in the survey—project sponsors (6), project managers (5), project impacted employees (4), project team members (8), and account executives (2). The number following the role represents the number of surveys returned by employees having this type of role. Nine people did not specify their role. No respondent identified themselves as an executive.

Roles and Responsibilities
For the survey categories, each possible response to the Likert-type survey was assigned a point value so that an average score could be calculated for each question. Strongly disagree had a point value of 1, disagree was 2, tend to disagree 3, tend to agree 4, agree 5, and strongly agree 6. No responses were completed as NA (not applicable).

The survey responses were grouped in two categories—sponsor and non-sponsor. The nine surveys that did not have a designation were categorized as non-sponsor. The responses by non-sponsors to the questions regarding the sponsors' roles and responsibilities averaged between 3.2 and 4.3, which represents the "tend to disagree"/"tend to agree" category (Exhibit 2). No question received an average response of "agree" (a score of 5) from the non-sponsors. Sponsors rated sponsor roles and responsibilities higher than non-sponsor respondents.

Three survey questions were included in the questionnaire to assess how respondents perceived the executives' execution of their roles and responsibilities relative to projects (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 2. Sponsor Role and Responsibilities Responses

Survey Statement	Non-Sponsor Responses	Sponsor Responses
Sponsors accept responsibility for unsuccessful project processes and outcomes.	3.2	4.0
Sponsors make tough decisions related to the projects.	3.6	4.0
Sponsors eliminate barriers between individuals, work groups, and projects.	3.6	4.7
Sponsors provide clear and consistent direction to the project managers.	3.7	4.5
Sponsors make their expectations clear to the project managers and project core teams.	3.7	4.5
Sponsors accept responsibility for successful project processes and outcomes.	3.7	4.6
Sponsors display commitment to the projects through their actions and communications.	3.8	4.8
Sponsors publicly stand behind the project core team and their decisions.	4.1	5.2
Sponsors provide guidance, but do not interfere with project managers' or project core teams' execution of the project.	4.2	4.7
Average	3.7	4.6

Overall, all participants in the survey were negative about the way executives were executing their duties. Sponsors were the most negative, disagreeing with the statements.

Exhibit 3. Executive Role and Responsibilities Responses

Survey Statement	Non-Sponsor Responses	Sponsor Responses
There is a high degree of unity of purpose between the sponsors, executives, and program managers.	3.6	2.2
Executives eliminate barriers between individuals, work groups, and projects.	3.1	2.5
Executives display commitment to the projects through their actions and communications.	3.8	2.2
Average	3.5	2.3

Risks to Project Success

To analyze the situation from another perspective, the respondents were asked to rate potential risks to project success by allocating 100 points across 10 risk factors. The potential risk ratings are summarized in Exhibit 4. Both non-sponsors and sponsors were consistent in viewing insufficient "IT support" as a high risk. The risk area with the highest difference of perception was "lack of alignment in direction by sponsors, executives, and the program manager." Sponsors view this area as a much higher risk than did non-sponsors. Non-sponsors rated "lack of commitment by sponsors and/or executives" as a higher risk than the "lack of alignment" issue. Both of this issues though are risks related to issues with top management support.

Lessons Learned

The study uncovered lessons relating to roles and responsibilities, which can increase engineering managers' understanding of project implementation success. One of the most critical findings was the lack of alignment of top leadership regarding the projects. The survey response to the statement "There is a high degree of unity of purpose between the sponsors, executives, and program manager," earned a score of 3.6 from non-sponsors and only a 2.2 score from sponsors. Alignment of the top leadership concerning project priorities is a critical factor for project success not only in the literature, but according to the sponsors in this study. Research has shown that poorly defined scope is the most frequently mentioned barrier to project success (Gobeli and Larson, 1986; Pinto and Slevin, 1988). The project managers in this study had sought to gain the alignment during the project definition phase when detailed project scopes were reviewed, discussed with top management, and agreed upon. Signatures representing agreement were secured. Also, project managers met quarterly with the top management group to provide project status reports. It is not clear whether full cognitive alignment ever existed even given these steps or whether alignment deteriorated during implementation. It is interesting to note that there was little management turnover between project definition and implementation. The same management group had agreed to the original project scopes, were not aligned during implementation.

The low sponsor responses to two statements about the executive role relative to projects highlighted the disharmony that existed within top leadership. Sponsors rated the executives 2.5 in "eliminating barriers between groups" and a 2.2 in "displaying commitment to the projects." This sentiment was further highlighted in the questions concerning risks to project success. The sponsors rated "lack of commitment" and "lack of alignment at the top" as two of their top three risks. With disharmony at the top between sponsors and executives about the projects, it is not surprising that sponsors were not performing well in their primary project duties—maintaining the priority of the projects

Exhibit 4. Risk Area Rankings

Risk Area	Average Non-Sponsor Responses	Average Sponsor Responses	Difference
Insufficient IT support	19.4	20.7	1.3
Uncertainty and changeability	13.3	6.2	7.1
Lack of commitment by sponsors and/or executives	10.5	17.2	6.7
Lack of alignment in direction by sponsors, executives, and program manager	6.8	22.2	15.4
Lack of collaboration between project teams and impacted work groups	10.4	2.8	7.6
Lack of accountability	7.8	1.8	6.0
Unclear roles	6.5	3.3	3.2
Project manager skill level	6.1	2.8	3.3
Skill level of consultants/contractors	5.9	3.7	2.2
Unclear project goals	5.4	1.8	3.6

and assisting in overcoming organization obstacles for the project managers (Verzuh, 1999).

Implications to Engineering Managers

Many engineering managers manage people that manage projects. Increasing our understanding of how to best mentor project managers, can help engineering managers become more effective. Project success has been described as analogous to a three-legged stool with one leg representing project managers, one leg representing line managers, and one leg representing top management. Project managers and line managers are considered equals in the organization and projects often require working across boundaries that are difficult to navigate. The third leg of the stool, top management, is critical and necessary for project success (Kerzner, 2003). If the third leg is dysfunctional, than project success is unlikely.

It is not a new finding that project success is strongly affected by the degree to which a project has the support of top management. Pinto and Slevin (1988) found this to be true in their frequently cited research. This study highlights that even with a well-defined scope agreement, it is still possible to have alignment and commitment issues at the top that can hurt project success. Even though research consistently highlights a poorly defined scope as the most frequently mentioned barrier to project success, a well-defined scope does not guarantee project commitment and alignment during implementation. The implication of this finding is that project managers must do more than develop top management support of their projects in the initial stages. It is also important that project managers be politically astute enough to identify where the misalignment exists in the top management ranks and facilitate the realignment, at least relative to their project and any other area that can impact their project's success.

Typically the project sponsor has been considered responsible for identifying misalignment in the organization and influencing the realignment relative to the project he or she is sponsoring. But what happens if the top managers, including the sponsor are in disharmony, resulting in the sponsor being ineffective? An ineffective sponsor positioned between the project team and

top management is a barrier to communication, understanding, and alignment. In this situation, the best alternative may be for the project manager to operate as the sponsor. By doing this, the project manager interfaces directly with top management and thus facilitates more effective interactions, and ultimately alignment and commitment by top management.

There is a consequence to this action though. Project managers are often not skilled in the art of persuading superiors and will need to develop this skill (Gray and Larson, 2003). Being able to understand and leverage the political nature of the organization could be necessary for the project manager (Pinto and Kharbanda, 1995). Without an effective sponsor, project managers will need to be more politically savvy.

The overall implication to engineering managers is that it may be necessary to select project managers with an ability to play a broker role. Brokers are politically astute in acquiring resources and maintaining legitimacy for their unit (Denison, Hooijberg, and Quinn, 1995). It may not be sufficient to have project managers with skills in the traditional area of project tools and techniques, and in project team leadership. It may be necessary for the project manager to possess an ability to broker, to negotiate and persuade in order to navigate the political climate in the organization and create the alignment needed between the project team and top management. This study would indicate that engineering managers should add this criterion to their selection considerations when assessing project managers for projects that do not have effective sponsors.

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