



Project Managers: The Client Perspective

Project Managers vary by organization and by individual. Some are external Consultants; some are from an organization's Project Management Center of Excellence while others may simply come from an organization's line managers. When looking to engage a Project Manager, a client must first determine exactly what type of Project Manager they are looking for – Do they want a Project Manager that has a general or deep knowledge in their line of business? Do they want a Project Manager that has a stronger technical acumen vs. business acumen? Is it acceptable for the Project Manager to be strong in some skills but only adequate in others? Does the Project Manager need to be on site during the entire week or can he or she fly in for four days and work remotely for one day? Does the Project Manager need to have a Project Management Professional (PMP) certification? All these considerations and more must be taken into account when engaging a Project Manager.

“Real” Project Managers vs. “Project Jockeys”

A PMP certification is a common requirement for Project Managers today. But given the considerations above, a PMP certification is just one of many items to consider. Regardless of whether a prospective Project Manager has a PMP certification or not, there are important skill attributes that set apart a “real” Project Manager vs. what we call a “Project Jockey” . I discuss what I consider to be six key attributes:

About Us

Kenny & Company is a management consulting firm offering Strategy, Operations and Technology services to our clients.

We exist because we love to do the work. After management consulting for 20+ years at some of the largest consulting companies globally, our partners realized that when it comes to consulting, bigger doesn't always mean better.

Instead, we've created a place where our ideas and opinions are grounded in experience, analysis and facts, leading to real problem solving and real solutions – a truly collaborative experience with our clients making their business our business.

We focus on getting the work done and prefer to let our work speak for itself. When we do speak, we don't talk about ourselves, but rather about what we do for our clients. We're proud of the strong character our entire team brings, the high intensity in which we thrive, and above all, doing great work.

What's Inside

Project Managers vs. "Project Jockeys"	p 1
Six Key Attributes	p 3, 4
Conclusion	p 4
About the Author	p 4

Able to See the Big Picture

Often times, a Project Manager can be too focused on his or her project. Certainly the daily work of creating status reports, managing risks/issues, resolving conflicts within the team, getting clarifications on requirements, and other operational items will take up much of the Project Manager's time. However, a "real" Project Manager will look ahead or outside of their project to help navigate around future problems created by other projects. They must look at the overall business drivers, goals and the impact that a project will have.

Decision Maker vs. Order Taker

It's very easy for a Project Manager, especially one who is new to the field, to become an order taker on projects. Sometimes this comes from a lack of knowledge of the project, other times it comes from lack of confidence or it is just the nature of the individual. If a client wants to engage or hire a "real" Project Manager, they need to find an individual who is unafraid to make decisions or to call out issues or risks – making sure to provide mitigation strategies! The client should expect a Project Manager to be in control of the project and the situations that inevitably arise. It should be the Project Manager that guides the client past these obstacles and not as the other way around.

People Person

Even with the skills provided by either PMP certification or from other experienced based sources, a Project Manager needs to know how to manage people. Not just in terms of managing direct reports but also managing customers, sponsors and even who they report to. Communication is a key but what separates a "real" Project Manager from a "Project Jockey" is one who can communicate at all levels in the organization and also relate to others. The ability to build a rapport and communicate with different personalities is a must for the Project Manager. Projects tend to run better when people actually like the project manager than if people don't.

Problem Solving

Problem solving has many varied tools for different situations. For project management, problems typically occur in one of two areas: process and people.

What I refer to as process encompasses those types of problems encountered when trying to execute tasks in the project life cycle. For example, a client is unhappy with the results of a project that was just completed for them. The project achieved its objectives per the requirements and SOW – fulfilled scope, came in under budget and delivered on time. In cases such as these, tools such as a Cause and Effect diagram, Appreciative Inquiry, 5 Whys, and others could be of help in determining the root cause for the client's unhappiness. Many of these tools are readily available to any Project Manager interested in using them from outside sources. There is no standard nor right or wrong when it comes to which tool a Project Manager may or may not use in their project work.

People problems require a different set of tools also readily available for the Project Manager. Methods such as forcing, compromising, withdrawing and smoothing are knowledge items for a PMP certified individual. However, knowing the problem solving methods and executing them are two different things. In order to execute these methods, a Project Manager needs to be put into the actual situation and only real life situations will determine if he or she can utilize these tools effectively. Clients should interview for these real life experiences.

Communication

Of all the skills required by the Project Manager, communication is likely the most important. Making sure that the client is aware of what is happening in the project and where they need to make key decisions goes a long way towards making certain that the project runs smoothly.

Standard tools such as communication/escalation plans, status reporting, risk/issue logs provide the details, while face to face meetings help build the relationship with a customer which leads to confidence in the project as well as in the project manager's ability to deliver.

Project Managers who attain PMP certification do gain a varied toolset of the types of documentation that is useful in project management. PMP training also provides when and to whom these documents should be provided to. However, tools are only as effective as the person who wields them and to be an effective wielder of tools, one must develop and have good (if not exceptional) people skills. This is true not only in the field of project management but in almost every other profession. Nothing fosters good relationships with your client than talking and listening to them.

Leadership

The Project Manager must be the leader of the project. Clients look to the Project Manager for status and making sure the project moves smoothly towards completion and also for recommendations when things go wrong. Stakeholders look to the Project Manager to make sure their part of the organization is not adversely impacted by what the project does. The project team looks to the Project Manager for making sure what they are working on contributes to the success of the project.

If there is one characteristic that is important on a project but not something that can necessarily be learned, it is the characteristic of leadership. For a client looking for a "real" Project Manager, they need to make sure who they engage matches their criteria of what are good leadership skills. In addition to a face to face meeting, reviewing the individual's past projects and their specific role on those projects should provide enough information to make the right decision to engage or not.

Conclusion

A PMP certification is a common and recommended requirement for Project Managers today. PMP certification is but a small part of what clients should be looking for in a Project Manager. It establishes a baseline for what a Project Manager should know. The true test of whether someone has the ability to actually run a project can only be determined in the field. Finally, each client must identify what they are looking for in a Project Manager and use that list as criteria instead of blindly engaging someone on the basis of a certification or firm reputation. An analogy I like to use is: would you buy a car seeing it just sitting on a lot with its bright, shiny exterior or would you instead buy one after test driving it? Look to these six key attributes and interview around them to engage a "real" Project Manager vs. a "Project Jockey" .

About the Author



Jeffrey Kitsu is a Manager at Kenny & Company. Mr. Kitsu has over 20 years of IT Project Management experience of which the past ten were spent managing large projects Fortune 500 companies. Mr. Kitsu holds a BS, Mathematics / Computer Science, from the University of Nevada-Reno and is a PMP and CSM. He is a former Consultant with Accenture.

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