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45
THOUGHT
{ ## Core competences for Project Managers - avoiding the need to 'walk on water'

This Lucid Thought picks up on previous thoughts about the role of the Project Manager and how to get best value from them through the proper use of:

- Business sponsors (Lucid Thought 41),
- Project support (Lucid Thought 42), and
- Technical experts (Lucid Thought 44).

In particular we commented on whether a Project Manager should be a **'Jack of all Trades'** or accept that partnerships are needed with other people with different skills. We particularly noted that domain knowledge is really a **'doubled double-edged sword'** - helpful on the one hand and un-helpful on the other.

Much of our recent work has involved us working with major organisations who have adopted a competence based approach to describing jobs and developing their staff. We have studied the job competency profiles of these organisations, and the 'standards' that exist including the International Project Management Association's (IPMA) Competency Baseline (ICB3) see **www.ipma.ch** and the Project Manager Standard produced by the Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards (GAPPS) - downloadable from **www.globalpmstandards.org**. The spectrum of 'hard' and 'soft' competencies that organisations require Project Managers to hold is both wide and deep and in some cases would only need 'walks on water' adding to describe the 'perfect' organisational operator.

At a recent British Computer Society meeting we attended, the speaker (Elizabeth Harrin from the insurance company AXA) gave everyone in the audience post-it notes and asked us to write on them what we considered to be the key skills (competencies) required by a Project Manager; the subtext being what makes a good or excellent one not just an ordinary one. In total 103 post-it notes were completed by a very willing audience. It won't come as a surprise to some of you reading this article that 100 of the skills listed that evening were people-related or 'soft' skills, such as being an effective leader, a good listener, having the ability to deal with conflict and so on. Only three people said the most important things were specific to the 'harder' tools and techniques of project management with risk management, good at planning and good at identifying requirements being mentioned. Nobody actually listed 'walks on water' but mumblings like 'wears underwear on the outside of their tights' and 'miracle worker' could be heard.

So we have international frameworks based on rigorous research outlining a whole range of competencies; and 'quick and dirty' surveys prioritising the human skills as being the most important. What should we make of this when selecting and developing Project Managers?

Building on our past experiences of working with a number and range of competency frameworks, our view is that competency (in any discipline) can be broken down into four areas which together build to give a complete representation of what is needed.

Willing to grow → **Awareness Of Self** → Willing to learn

Practice What You Know — Developing Competent Behaviour — **Understand Essential Knowledge**

Willing to try → **Adopt An Appropriate Mind-set** ← Willing to adapt
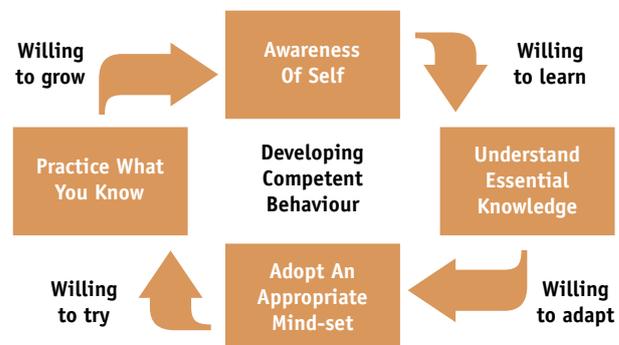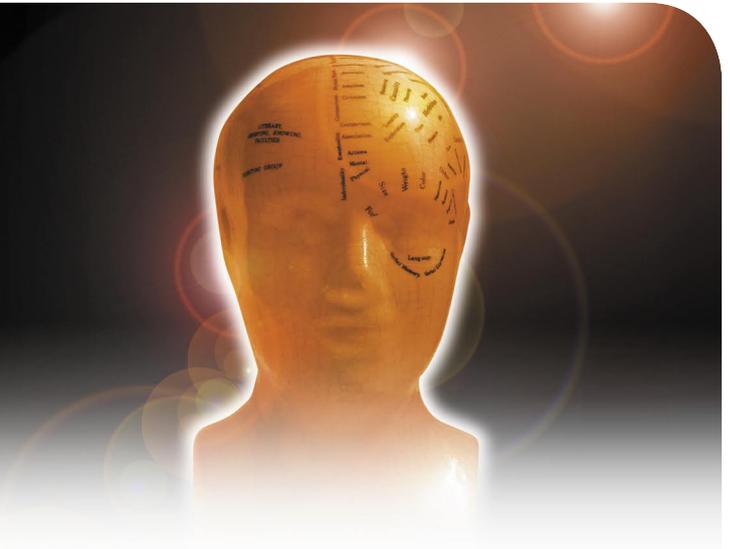
Most project management competency frameworks acknowledge that competent behaviour is made up of these four areas of personal characteristics, knowledge, attitude, and activation (doing it skilfully), but then go on to list a whole host of specific elements that are also deemed necessary. Our observation is that these are all things that someone needs to do well as part of the management of the project, but realistically this someone doesn't have to be the Project Manager.

So perhaps what we have in international standards and in-company job competence profiles and frameworks is a list of competencies for project management - complete and thorough, but what we also need is to understand the real priority competences for those people who will lead the team towards achieving successful project delivery.

Of course, different organisations and different contexts require different things, but these are our Top 10 that are generically applicable.

It seems inevitable as times goes on that there will be continued realisation that great Project Managers are first and foremost great managers; but in saying this that there remains something special and distinct about being a manager in a project context. When we can elucidate competent behaviour for Project Managers in a couple of pages of A4; then we might also make speedier headway in developing the right personal and organisational competencies to create more value through managed change.

THE PERFECT PROJECT MANAGER?
1. Influences and motivates the team
2. Holds sight of the goal and relative priorities
3. Communicates effectively at all levels (two-way)
4. Organises and re-organises easily
5. Anticipates change
6. Negotiates lasting solutions
7. Knows themselves well enough to 'not get in the way'
8. Asks for help
9. Takes and lives with decisions
10. Systematically improves
Walking on Water not required!

We'd love to hear what would appear on your Top 10.

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