Critical Soft Skills for Effective PMO Leadership

Published: 27 February 2018   ID: G00352662

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Skills in PPM methodologies, process and technology are important. However, a great PMO leader must hone specific soft skills to facilitate success in project management and project execution through the work of others. Here, we identify the five key attributes that PPM leaders need to run PMOs.

Key Challenges

- Many PMO leaders view project team members as units of production. They fail to identify their capability, potential and passion, and to link these to projects and programs for better and faster results and outcomes.

- PMO leaders often underestimate the importance of soft skills and the amount of time required to develop and hone these skills. As a consequence, they end up hampering their immediate effectiveness and growth as organizational leaders.

Recommendations

The PMO function is more than about tasks and project deliverables. It is also about change. For PPM leaders focused on successful change and PMO transformation, which depends on engagement from all stakeholders, we recommend the following actions:

- Develop your empathy. Assess others’ points of view (POVs) so you can address their needs and maximize their effectiveness simultaneously.

- Communicate in ways that create change, manage expectations and enable alignment across teams by tailoring the message and delivery style to the audience.

- Model personal behavior to lead change effectively by consistently acting in accordance with the new rules and constant force behind the required changes. Teams often follow the style of their leader and adopt behaviors by observing.

- Establish yourself as a servant leader by making other people the winners through true empowerment and actively encouraging team members to take full ownership for their tasks.
Become an expert at persuasion and influence by understanding the various points of view and achieving meaningful interaction.

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Introduction

Success for the project management office (PMO) leader depends on the contribution and participation of many people in the organization. Dealing with other human beings requires a different set of skills than those that project, program and portfolio management (PPM) practitioners and IT leaders may use to solve, for example, a system problem. Building support for an initiative, idea or concept depends on the soft skills around socialization, discussion and synthesis. Soft skills are defined as those attributes that enable an individual to interact effectively and harmoniously with others, and they are complementary to learned occupational and professional skills.¹

Soft skills aren’t simple skills. Some PMO leaders may find that they possess an intrinsic understanding of them, while others have to constantly work on reminding, improving and assessing these skills. However, soft skills cannot be ignored. A lack of soft skills can be, and has been, a career killer for many in leadership positions. They are as integral as technical skills to the PMO leader’s career and success. And in some cases, they are more integral, especially if the PMO leader is driving organizational change.

And the good news is — they can be learned.
This document, the first in a series of research notes on soft skills for roles in PPM, discusses the five key soft skills that a PMO leader must learn and cultivate to be successful. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Critical Soft Skills for Effective PMO Leadership**

### The Five Soft Skills Key of PMO Leadership

1. **Develop Your Empathy and Assess Others’ POV So You Can Address Their Needs and Maximize Their Effectiveness Simultaneously**
2. **Communicate in Ways That Create Change, Manage Expectations and Enable Alignment Across Teams**
3. **Model Personal Behavior to Lead Change Effectively**
4. **Establish Yourself as a Servant Leader, Defining Who and What You Are Serving**
5. **Become an Expert at Persuasion and Influence, Since PMOs Have Limited Positional Power**

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Source: Gartner (February 2018)

### Analysis

**Soft Skill No. 1: Develop Your Empathy and Assess Others' POV So You Can Address Their Needs and Maximize Their Effectiveness Simultaneously**

Empathy is a required soft skill for being an effective PMO leader. Understanding the position or opinion of a peer, manager or team member isn’t enough. The ability to explain that person’s POV and motivation is key to eliminating biases, making better decisions and motivating staff. Achieving empathy requires sincerity and authenticity, or your actions could be interpreted as manipulative.

Understanding points of view is always a good first step to achieving empathy. Taking the time to really assess another point of view can help immensely in getting your point across.

Put yourself in the shoes of the person or group of people you are persuading or communicating with. Blaming or looking for ways your target audience should change is not only an indicator that you aren’t considering their POV, but it’s also a good opportunity to change your own POV. Achieving empathy is key here. You can do that by trying to understand other points of view by taking opposing sides, paraphrasing alternative arguments and really listening to what is being said.
To understand another’s POV and integrate it into your own may be as simple as sincerely asking the person to explain it to you, listening without preconceived conclusions and then explaining it back to that person's satisfaction.

The POV of your peers, or co-workers, is an equally important area to explore at improving your empathic sense. Sometimes, sincere feedback can come in a nonthreatening way from peers. Their honest and direct feedback could be a testing ground for your plans, and getting legitimate feedback can be improved by first empathizing with their position and POV.

"Socialization" is an in-vogue term that is often used by managers to communicate decisions in a nonthreatening and bottom-up-like approach. To socialize a new idea is to get people to talk about it on an informal basis to establish a common understanding of terms and (eventually) goals. Exploring your peer’s POV, understanding it and discussing it with other peers is a form of socialization and the start of your communication plan that will lead to you being perceived as more empathic. Socialization also often helps reduce resistance to change, making leaders more effective in getting results.

Soft Skill No. 2: Communicate in Ways That Create Change, Manage Expectations and Enable Alignment Across Teams

Great communication — which balances speaking, listening and facilitating — inspires action and commitment, and it drives better business outcomes. PMO leaders must effectively communicate with people who sit above, adjacent to and beneath their position in the organization chart to execute on plans and achieve performance goals. However, while communication is a critical leadership competency, it is rarely part of PMO leaders' formal education beyond the formal reporting done on projects and programs. Communication is as much about listening as it is about telling. As such, feedback is critical and must be built in to ensure the practice of multidirectional communication that engages employees and encourages feedback (see "Effective Communications: A Strategy").

Any time you need to share information with or solicit information from people, a simple plan can help you think through your opportunities to make your message meaningful to the right audiences. A communication plan also helps you identify an effective course of action by defining the essential elements of communication — purpose, communicator, stakeholders, messages, delivery method, delivery frequency, feedback, measures of success and timing.

Here is a simple example of choice of delivery method and acting on feedback. A PMO leader put together an exhaustive and detailed presentation for his leadership. He was five minutes into the presentation and was told, "You need to come back with pictures." He immediately understood the need to communicate in a way that was relevant to the recipient — which in this case was extremely clear. He has since embraced the concept of always adapting his communication style to the audience and has seen much better results.

Ultimately, communication is about not only delivery, but also acceptance of the change. Project managers (PMs) tend to fall short on the second part of this statement. Soft skills of empathy will help with the big picture.
Soft Skill No. 3: Model Personal Behavior to Lead Change Effectively

The PMO function is more than just tasks and project deliverables. It is also about change. Every time IT solutions are implemented, operational parameters of the business are changed. Rules are made explicit; informal practices are formalized; processes are redesigned; and people’s role in the process changes. When the protective mechanism of "this is how we have always done it" is removed, PMs and project teams will look to leadership, including the PMO leader, for new stability and certainty to hold on to. PMO leaders who want to steer their team through change must do so on several levels:

- **Explicitly:** Clearly communicate the new rules and expectations for the new situation, which includes the new metrics and the intended outcomes.

- **Implicitly:** Walk the talk. Consistently act in accordance with the new rules and expectations, and consistently address misaligned behaviors as they surface. Ignoring old habits equals endorsing them.

- **Symbolically:** Be more than a person — be a symbol of security, cohesion and stability for the project teams in times of change. Many leaders — not only PMO leaders — underestimate this part of their role.

- **Representationally:** Be the "brand ambassador" promoting the brand image and selling the team’s services within the organization (see "The PMO Leader’s First 100 Days"). As a PMO leader, the people on your team expect you to represent them in the political arena — to procure resources, remove obstacles and secure recognition for the work they do.

- **Relentlessly:** Be a constant force behind the required changes to effect change leadership. Appearing and disappearing, jumping in and then ignoring things, and unpredictable behavior all undermine the much-needed stability that your team needs.

The list above also represents a litmus test of whether you, as PMO leader, are set up for success. If you cannot model the change as suggested above, this bears careful consideration. Do you need to discuss expectations with your leadership? Are you positioned correctly within the organization? Do you have the support from adjacent peers and leadership to perform to these expectations? The expectations are there, regardless of whether you are empowered to meet them.

Soft Skill No. 4: Establish Yourself as Servant Leader, Defining Who and What You Are Serving

The higher up you go in the organization, the more you need to make other people winners and not make it about winning yourself. A key soft skill for the PMO leader is that of servant leadership. Servant leadership might strike some as an oxymoronic concept: How can a person serve and lead at the same time? Servant leadership, in this context, is the philosophy that PMOs — and, by default, PMO leaders — serve no purpose of their own. That means that everything the PMO does is done in service to some other group. The PMO leader must also be proactive in inspiring and developing others. Help your team members understand their respective roles and their personal contribution to achieving the team’s purpose. This involves:
Setting the right challenges for the team

Raising the bar high enough to keep them interested and motivated (but not so high it becomes impossible to succeed)

Distinguishing true empowerment from delegation

Actively encouraging team members to take full ownership for their tasks

For example, encourage PMs to form a community of practice to discuss and solve issues, share best practices, and mentor junior PMs (see “Toolkit: Training Project Managers to Conduct Peer Health Checks”).

Another example of practicing servant leadership to project managers is when the PMO leader ensures that PMs operate in an environment that allows them to be successful. This is done by fixing the organizational issues that may jeopardize their project success. This may include ensuring enough resources, streamlining processes so that they are "just enough," and providing the right tools.

Soft Skill No. 5: Become an Expert at Persuasion and Influence, Since PMOs Have Limited Positional Power

PMO-driven initiatives require stakeholder sponsorship and support throughout to be successful. Coercion will fail, but persuasion will succeed. PMO leaders can apply Cialdini’s six persuasion principles, which have been proven scientifically effective to secure lasting support for the PMO-driven initiative. The six principles are:

- **Reciprocation**: The obligation to repay. Reciprocation recognizes that people feel indebted to those who do something for them.

- **Social proof**: The power of what others do. When people are uncertain about a course of action, they tend to look to those around them to guide their decisions and actions.

- **Commitment and consistency**: The need for personal alignment. People are more likely to do something after they’ve agreed to it verbally or in writing. People strive for consistency in their commitments.

- **Liking**: The obligations of friendship. People prefer to say yes to those they know and like.

- **Authority**: We obey those in charge. People respect authority. They want to follow the lead of real experts.

- **Scarcity**: Scarcity is a fundamental in economics. In sociology, the more rare something is, the more people will want it.

However, not everyone can be the focus of intense persuasion efforts. Therefore, care should be taken to identify the stakeholders whose support will be most critical to advancing the effort. These include:
- The people who need to sign off on anything required to advance the associated initiatives. Most notably, these include the executive leaders of the organization.

- Those below the executive ranks who carry out the activities needed to advance the effort. This is because executives, sponsors or business leaders may say they support your initiative, but if those on the front lines balk and refuse to move it forward, the masses will often win out.

- The most influential — those with informal as well as formal power. Whether these influencers reside on the IT or business side, identifying them and winning them over will drive others to get onboard as well.

Persuasion and influence entail two things: understanding points of view and achieving meaningful interaction (see "Adapt the Science of Influence to Develop Your Art of Persuasion"). Unfortunately, when attempting to persuade peers and senior managers, many leaders regard the be-all and end-all of persuasion as embodied in a PowerPoint deck. PowerPoint is a tool, not the end state. Although PowerPoint may be an accepted means of communication in many organizations, the act of persuasion and influence starts before and continues after the formal presentation. In other words, it is important to recognize that the beginning and end of the meeting are not the beginning and end of your influence and persuasion activities. Leverage change management best practices to help build out the influence and persuasion with a well-thought-out approach and plan.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"Use Brain-Aware Change Techniques to Scale Digital Business"

"Maverick* Research: Living and Leading in the Brain-Aware Enterprise"

"Maverick* Research: How to Manage a 'Selfie-Centered' Workforce"

"The PMO Leader's First 100 Days"

"Predicts 2018: PPM Leaders Must Keep Pace With Digital Business"

"Five Best Practices PMOs Can Use to Effectively Support Organizational Change"

"PMO Transformation Primer for 2018"

"Effective Communications: A Strategy"

"Toolkit: Training Project Managers to Conduct Peer Health Checks"

"Adapt the Science of Influence to Develop Your Art of Persuasion"
Evidence

1 Investopedia.

2 "SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating With and Influencing Others." NeuroLeadership.org.

3 "The Servant as Leader." The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.


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