Training Soft Skills to Project Managers: An Experience Report

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ABSTRACT

The success of software projects is driven by the magical triangle between time, budget, and quality. While short term thinking focuses on time and budget, it is quality that has the most important impact on long term customer satisfaction. Thus, providing good quality software is crucial for success. Quality is influenced by several factors. It depends on the entire software development process and related activities (e.g., requirements management, configuration management, design controls, etc.). However, quality cannot be forced from outside. It is well known, but often forgotten, that it is the team and its relation to the project manager that decides on success or failure of a project. Improving the skills of the project managers improves the quality of the products. The limiting factor usually is not related to technical skills that can be trained quite easily. In fact, project management is all about communication and leadership competencies which are far more difficult (but not impossible) to train. In this paper, the author reports on experiences with this kind of training from an industrial point of view. In particular, the author describes what was most helpful and where the major difficulties lay.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Human Aspects, Project Management, Soft Skills, Software Projects

INTRODUCTION

End of last century the Gallup Organization undertook extensive studies on “what the world’s greatest managers do differently” (Buckingham et al., 1999). Gallup surveyed over a million employees from various companies, industries and countries. Among other questions they tried to find out what talented employees need from their workplace.

The result was surprising. In the introduction of their book “First, break all the rules” the authors state that “the talented employee may join the company because of its charismatic leader, its generous benefits, and its world-class training program, but how long that employee stays and how productive he is while he is there is determined by his relationship with his immediate supervisor” (Buckingham et al., 1999). The correlation of leadership styles with software developer job satisfaction has also been demonstrated more recently by Westlund (2011). In a scenario like project management, that, according to Salaheldin, Sharif, and Al Alami (2010), is a hot topic in many sectors, the role of competent project managers is unquestionable. The statement cited above illustrates the crucial role of project managers and the impact of the relationship between the individual team members and the project.
manager on the performance – and thus on quality. Consequently, if you want to improve efficiency and quality of your development teams, you should start improving the efficiency of the project managers. Initiatives devoted to analyze competency levels of IT Professionals are not absolutely new (e.g., Colomo-Palacios et al., 2010; Ruano-Mayoral et al., 2010; Trigo et al., 2010). This work presents an initiative in which a specific training for software project managers was designed and implemented in an industrial environment.

THE CHALLENGE

Trainings usually focus on technical skills. You learn about processes and methods (such as work breakdown structure or estimating techniques). In the 4th edition of the PMBOK® guide published by the Project Management Institute only a tiny part is dedicated to soft skills (PMI, 2008). The project management methodology PRINCE2® does not focus on human aspects such as motivation, delegation or team leadership either (CCTA, 1999). A positive exception is the training program of the International Project Management Association (IPMA). Roughly one third of the competencies defined in (IPMA, 2006) are so-called “behavioral competencies.”

Of course, processes and methods are important for project success, but they do not improve the “relationship” of the employee with “his immediate supervisor.” For this soft skills are required – and should be trained.

The relationship between employees and their supervisor is closely related to the idea of leadership. People will follow those they admire, those that communicate a vision and those they feel attached to. In the world of software development we tend to forget this aspect. We are used to base everything on logic. Emotions and conflicts are taboo. We are conditioned to keep them low.

However, relationship cannot be explained purely by logic. It is something very personal, since it concerns individuals. One of the results what the world’s greatest managers do differently is that they are not “just”, which means that they do not treat their employees equally. Instead, they give different degree of autonomy and even different kind of benefits, depending on what is most motivating for the employee. This implies that the manager has to understand the individuals, their personality, their wishes and needs. Tom DeMarco goes even further in “The Deadline” when he states that “you have to like them” (DeMarco, 1997).

Can this be trained? Surely, a certain disposition of the trainee is mandatory. What can be definitely trained are communication skills and the understanding of schemes and mechanisms. You can sensitize team leaders and project managers to the human factor in project management. Of course, this is not easy. Like skiing, it becomes more difficult with growing age.

Also, a lot of practice is required to internalize new behaviour. The more you practice, the higher is the probability that you react correctly under pressure – which unfortunately has become rather the rule than an exception in project management nowadays. Obviously, we practice during daily work, but this is not necessarily the ideal solution. Difficult situations should not be exercised with real employees in critical projects. Instead, the training provides an ideal environment.

THE TRAINING COURSE

In our company we recently performed a systematic training of 14 junior and senior project managers. The training consisted in 11 parts of one and half days each. The entire training took more than one year. In addition, three workshops were conducted in the beginning, at half-time and at the end.

The topics were all more or less related to communication and motivation. The following list is an excerpt of the syllabus:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Communication and related competencies
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