Emotional intelligence lets project managers learn about themselves and their teams—and advance their careers in the process.
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by Peter Fretty
The next time you're struggling to get your team to understand the urgency of a schedule shift or the impetus behind a scope change, take a step back and breathe. You may be failing to account for your team members' emotions.

It's easy to think projects come down to technical prowess or process competency. But in reality, projects succeed through human efforts, and emotions often influence—if not dictate—the actions of a well-rounded leader.

For years, emotional intelligence has been heralded as the answer. And it certainly seems promising. The basic premise goes something like this: People who are aware of their own feelings and emotions as well as those of their colleagues can use that information to guide their actions.

And many advocates of emotional intelligence report a solid ROI.

Taking the time to understand the factors associated with emotional intelligence helps project managers establish stronger and more positive relationships with project stakeholders at all project levels, says Frank P. Saladis, PMP, president of Blue Marble Enterprises Inc., New York, New York, USA. He also is past president of PMI's New York Chapter and chair of the PMI Education and Training Specific Interest Group.

"Project managers should understand that being aware of the emotional state of team members, clients and other stakeholders will assist them in developing the most effective methods for communicating within the project environment and will contribute to the improvement of their own communications skills," he says. "Understanding emotional intelligence and how project team members react to the daily pressures and demands of the project allows the project manager to develop better listening skills and to develop stronger and more trusting relationships."

Although the concept of emotional intelligence may be difficult to grasp, by harnessing and embracing the ability to understand and manage emotions, a project manager can benefit from better interactions with stakeholders, team members and external customers, explains Jarik E. Conrad, Ed.D., president of Conrad Consulting Group LLC, Jacksonville, Florida, USA.

"Having a high emotional intelligence translates into a realistic level of self-confidence, a noticeably improved ability to recognize and manage stress, enhanced problem-solving capabilities as well as an improved ability to cope with ongoing change," he says.

In addition, project managers with strong self-confidence and stress-management skills have an edge against the competition and deliver results where others could easily fail, says Debra J. Arnett, PMP, project manager at FedEx Express, Memphis, Tennessee, USA and president of PMI's Memphis Chapter.
"Managing stress is a key to good decision-making, and good decision-making is an edge you can’t afford to be without," she says.

Preferred Status

Emotional intelligence can also help project managers make the most of the “dotted-line relationships” common when projects require contributions from various organizational departments.

“When project success depends upon contributions from people who do not report directly to the project manager, the leader’s emotional intelligence can be tested,” says Dr. Conrad. “In these situations, project managers must rely on their ability to read people, relate to their perspective and be flexible in making demands. And when project managers master this, they can ultimately influence seemingly voluntary actions. The ability to understand, relate and adapt to others presents a project manager with the unique opportunity to gain preferential status as stakeholders assign projects.”

Project managers should realize that career advancement opportunities often accompany enhanced emotional intelligence, Dr. Conrad says.

“Emotional intelligence can enable you to set challenging, yet realistic goals and do what you need to do to achieve those goals,” he adds. "Whether the goal is becoming well-rounded in your current position or obtaining a higher-level position, emotional intelligence can help you understand what needs to be done and be assertive enough to get it done. The skills that come with a high emotional intelligence include solid observational skills, active listening, self-confidence and persistence.”

Aside from the benefit of enhanced working relationships, project managers with higher emotional intelligence often are more productive, adds Julie Moraga, an emotional intelligence coach, speaker and trainer at EQ4U LLC, Portland, Oregon, USA.

“These individuals can effectively deal with diverse personalities, are able to bring together otherwise difficult team structures and understand how to properly voice what they need to communicate,” she says. “This becomes increasingly important as careers progress and the number of leadership opportunities increase. Emotionally intelligent people are not as worried about themselves and they are able to empower others freely. For project managers, this translates into a stronger ability to obtain buy-in and exhibit influence in the team environment.”

If there’s so much to gain, why do people avoid addressing the impact of emotions on work relationships? Because to develop emotional
intelligence, a person has to want to change, explains JP Pawliw-Fry, president of the Institute for Health and Human Potential, Barrie, Ontario, Canada. "Unless internally motivated, people will only want to change if there is enough pain [within the organization]," he says.

But a lack of emotional intelligence can mean trouble across the organization.

"Emotions—especially negative emotions—are infectious," he says. "If managers are unable to manage their emotions, they can have a toxic effect on the people in their business."

**Judgment Time**

To build emotional intelligence, project managers should begin looking at how their actions are perceived. Most of us judge ourselves based on our intention, yet judge others based on their impact, Mr. Pawliw-Fry says.

"If you do not know the impact you are having on others, it is very hard to change your behavior," he explains. "This is why the most important thing you can do is get feedback from others. Once there is some insight into intention and impact, coming up with more skillful behaviors is much more effective."

And once they've started building up their emotional intelligence skills, project leaders must remember it's an ongoing job.

"Oftentimes, managers participate in a two-day learning program and then are sent back to the high-pressure environments where there is no follow-up and no way to 'cement' the learning," he says. "If repetition and accountability are not built into the learning process, under pressure, [project managers] return to their default behaviors. A great place to start in accountability is having a conversation with your manager about where you want to improve, and then enlisting the manager in the process."

Project managers should try not to lapse into old habits when the going gets tough.

Unfortunately, when deadlines increase the pressure, project managers often stop coaching and start pushing. "Over time, with increasingly more to do and fewer resources to do it with, we focus more on what we need to do as opposed to what our direct [reports] need, and what the business needs in the long run, which is [to] grow their capability," Mr. Pawliw-Fry says. "Team members feel like we are not coaching enough, and we feel like we are doing all we can with what we have. Most of us are blind to this sort of impact and wonder why our direct reports aren’t as committed as we are."

**Cultural Clarity**

Differing cultures can undoubtedly complicate team communications and increase frustration. But that can often be mitigated if the team manager has a strong emotional intelligence, explains Germán Bernate, founder and general manager of Bogotá, Colombia-based project management consulting firm Almagesto and past president of the PMI Santafé de Bogotá Chapter.

"Those with a higher emotional intelligence are more likely to learn from the culturally influenced points of view by truly listening and applying empathy to understand their perspective and position," he says. "After you learn [about culturally diverse team members’ customs, perspective and ideas], it is also an opportunity to teach your team members the value of your perspective."

Additionally, the patience emotional intelligence yields can make a project manager less likely to jump to conclusions about his or her own map of the world, explains Beryl Comar, principal of Dubai, United Arab Emirates-based Beryl Comar Fowler & Associates, a business training, coaching and consultancy organization.
With emotional intelligence, it becomes possible for one to see his or her job as educator and facilitator. "Managers with high emotional intelligence are more sensitive to group emotions and conflicts. And by allowing for expression and solutions, they become more of a family than a competitive group. These project managers are consequently more supportive and able to see and feel intention rather than criticize behaviors," she adds.

When dealing with multicultural teams, project leaders should try to remain objective. "You need to be able to manage your emotions enough to positively and constructively react to where people are and see the difference as a potential competitive advantage as opposed to a detriment," Dr. Qinrad says. "We may initially prefer having teams comprising like people because of the reduced conflict, but this is not healthy and often negatively impacts project performance. With a developed emotional intelligence, you are more likely to embrace diversity and seek out team members who can add to the outcome through their varying perspectives."

Knowledge of Self

Effectively developing emotional intelligence requires a conscious and continuous effort to remain self-aware. "Emotional intelligence development is an ongoing process or journey and is not often addressed, in part because people do not like to look at themselves," Ms. Moraga says.

When a problem arises, it is easiest to blame the team. "However, as leader, you need to be able to look at yourself and how you have contributed to the issue and what you can do to change the situation. With a strong sense of self-awareness, it is easier to embrace the need for different styles to get through to team members with diverse dynamics."

Project managers should regularly examine their own emotional responses to project issues and how others react.

"Observe the behaviors of team members during different stages of the project including periods of high stress or when a shared positive environment exists. This provides an opportunity to observe how the relationships between team members is developing and where additional action on the part of the project manager is required," Mr. Saladis says. "Understanding one's own emotions and how other people's emotions can affect the project environment will assist a team leader or project manager in determining the most appropriate actions and behaviors that will motivate the team and work toward resolving conflicts and issues."

Grasping the intrapersonal component is probably the most important yet most commonly overlooked aspect of leveraging emotional intelligence to achieve career success, says Dr. Conrad.

"Emotional intelligence has little value if we are unable to understand our own emotions, how and why we react the way we do in situations," he says. "We cannot be focusing on everyone else and evaluating other's emotions and behaviors without occasionally looking in the mirror and consistently realizing our own weaknesses. The goal of emotional intelligence is to gain a sincere appreciation and utilization of other's talents. Embracing self-reflection makes this a reality because it helps us avoid allowing our prejudices to overshadow our dealings with others."

Although emotional intelligence does hold the power to help open-minded project managers, it's not a magic pill. That said, those willing to commit the time necessary to properly develop, understand and apply emotional intelligence could gain knowledge of themselves and others while establishing the framework to move ahead.

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