



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Are You Still a Project Manager if You Have Limited Authority?

To start with, there is not a clear cut and agreed upon definition for a project manager. In some organizations, you find people with the title of project manager. In other organizations, you might have a title like Systems Analyst or Senior Developer, but you take on the role of a project manager. Usually companies use project manager as a role if they do not have full-time project management positions. In many organizations, you might be a project manager for a while, then be assigned as a project team member, and then maybe take on another project manager position after that. That's when the role of project manager makes more sense than a full-time title.

Project manager responsibilities are fairly similar in different companies

However, whether you have a title or a role of project manager, there is a basic set of job responsibilities that you normally have. Although all publications look at this differently, the responsibilities can be broken down into two major areas.

Process responsibilities. This includes defining and planning the project, and then managing risk, issues, scope, communication, etc.

People responsibilities. In addition to process skills, a project manager must have good people management abilities. These include leadership, motivating, communicating effectively, listening, providing performance feedback, etc. (Notice that the basic people management skills don't include hiring and firing people.)

Project manager authority is different from company to company

Most project managers would agree they have general process and people management responsibilities. However, different companies have different ways that they assign authority to the role of a project manager. The PMI Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) captures this thought by identifying up to five types of project management authority. At one end is a person who manages projects part-time, but has very little authority other than to coordinate the project team workload, and notify others when there is a potential problem. At the other end is a project manager with total authority over the project and the people. In between these extremes are other types of project managers who have various levels of authority to get things done independently.

You need to recognize your level of authority

There is nothing wrong with calling yourself a project manager, even if your level of authority is low. (Of course, if you called yourself a project coordinator or team leader, there would be nothing wrong with that either.) What is more important is that you recognize the level of authority you have, and determine how best to manage the project to a successful conclusion.

Let's take an example of scope management. All project managers should recognize when scope changes occur, and be able to document the benefit of the change and the impact to the project. If you are a project manager with less authority, you might need to



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take all scope change requests to the sponsor for resolution. If you had more authority, you might be able to approve a scope change yourself, if the impact is below a certain threshold. In both scenarios, the project manager manages the scope change request. The difference is how much authority you have to make final decisions yourself.

This holds true with communication, risk management, quality management, etc. You should first understand the level of authority you have, and then determine the project management procedures that are necessary to get things done. You might be surprised how few project managers have everything within their control. It is much more common for the project manager to have less than total control over all the people and resources. Instead, in many situations you need to see your functional manager, your client sponsor, a steering committee, etc, to get final decisions made.

You will find that the more experience you have, and the more successful you are, the more authority you will be given. Unless your managers are control nuts, they typically would rather delegate much of the routine project management authority anyway. They just need to have a degree of confidence that if they take on a less active role, you will be able to step up and fill a project management role with more decision-making authority.

Summary

Most project managers have limits on their ability to act independently. Even within one company, you will usually find some project managers with more authority than others. There is no shame in that. You need to understand your situation, and then determine the proper project management procedures within those limitations. You should find that you are able to acquire more power as you gain experience and have successfully completed projects in the past.



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