Finding, Developing and Managing Project Talent:
In Today's Top Enterprises, Everyone's a Talent Scout!
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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the acquisition, the steps needed to develop, and the challenges of managing Project Talent. Finding, managing and developing project talent is both a serious challenge and a great opportunity. Talent is essential in two project dimensions: Application Area talent in the disciplines needed to deliver the project's product, and in the Project Management competences needed to leverage that talented team.

Flawed approaches of today's Project Talent Scouts include a) ignoring the contributions of existing team members while focusing on finding "new talent" and/or b) sending them to classes, expecting the classes to produce instant results.

The most-savvy Talent Scouts not only recognize talent, they also amplify it, nurture it, and reward it. They use the entire progression of learning, beyond Knowledge, beyond Skills, beyond Attitudes, and beyond Competence, to attain Project Performance.

We worked recently with a Human Resources group from a major Defense Contractor. They wished to apply more-effective Project Management methods to their daily project activities.

One of this group's primary responsibilities is to search for qualified program and project participants. Early in the session, we observed that they are *Talent Scouts*, and the phrase struck a chord with them. After spending time with them, we came away with a greater appreciation for their efforts, and their contribution to project success.

What Is Talent?

Talent is the right combination of innate abilities, plus the knowledge, skills, attitudes, experience and competence needed to deliver performance for a specific situation. In a time when Human Capital is an Enterprise's most-valued economic asset, talent is your edge.

And where do you find this talent? Context considerations, such as the nature of your industry or your Enterprise culture can make it difficult to transfer talent from other environments. The search is difficult indeed.

The word talent is often in the press. Over the last 10 years books, magazines, websites and articles have used it frequently. Increasingly, the word talent is a substitute for the terms Human Resources or HR. For projects, "talent" is a bit nicer way to talk about the people we seek that help our projects succeed. The term is preferable, compared to staff, resources, or even team members.

Talent is also popular in other forms of media. Whether the ostensible purpose is to select a new singing idol or to dance with the stars (we all know it is primarily entertainment), some of today's highest-rated television shows track the progress of the same type of talent search some of us recall from over fifty years ago.
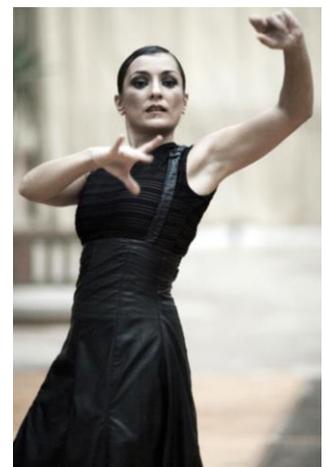
In the workplace, talent includes innate abilities that range from intelligence(s) and interpersonal skills to other factors. In Project Management, talent directly relates to Competence, a topic about which we frequently publish of late[1]. Can one develop talent?

Yes, as long as you fulfill some of those innate pre-requisites. Before getting into that, let's look at some background about talent.

Talent From Then To Now

In ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman times, talent was a term of measurement, often related to value. You may recall historic mentions of Forty Talents of Silver, whether in Akhenaten's Tomb (from a translated copper scroll) or other sources. As commonly used, a talent was the weight of the water or wine contents of an amphora; about 60 pounds (a significant amount!). Even then, a broader definition was forming. Dictionary.com notes:

"a power of mind or body considered as given to a person for use and improvement." citing the New Testament.

Today, regardless of the venue, talent is a term that describes either a person's natural abilities, their competence, or both, whether that person is an actress, a politician, a parent, or a project engineer. In fact, the IPMA[ii] Competence Baseline includes the Forty Talents (actually 48) of Project Managers, even more valuable than silver.

Finding Talent

That Human Resources group we worked with is not the only one searching for Project Talent. Increasingly, the competition is fierce for dearly needed talent. And the target moves. In the 1990's experienced Internet developers were the most sought-after talent. Today an emerging target talent is Competent Project Managers.

To find talent, you must know what you are looking for. This is not easy, because while resume keywords and searchable online databases can help with screening, finding talent comes down to two key steps:

1. Analyze and communicate what you are looking for, including the roles these persons must fill, and the qualifications (knowledge, skills, experience and competences) needed to properly fill those roles.

2. Observe and recognize those needed talents in the candidates you interview. Yet, despite today's technology, most hiring managers rely on interpersonal interaction to cement their judgment that the candidate demonstrates the needed talent.

For those seeking competent Project Managers and certain other stakeholders, IPMA-USA's[iii] NCB[iv] provides a foundation for insights into the first of those key steps. Its certification program leverages the work of IPMA and GAPPS (Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards) to develop role definitions for your most important project leadership roles. The outcome is a Performance Competence-based certification program that uses professional assessors to verify talent in the areas of PM performance that are most important for project success.

This Performance Competence-based Certification is no simple matter, much more difficult than preparing for Knowledge-based exam certifications. However, a candidate with thin talent in key areas will never convince trained professional competence assessors. See more about our certification program at the certification section of our website, ipma-usa.org.

If you have no interest in leadership team competences, IPMA-USA helps in other ways. Each stakeholder in a project, from Sponsor to Resource Manager, from internal Customer to Team Member, must demonstrate his or her needed Role/Competences.

The ProjectExperts' PM CompModel lists criteria and appropriate performance levels for these roles, using those 48 Talents of competent Project Managers. The outcome is a list of gaps and strengths of each stakeholder for their roles. This is valuable both for project risk management, and for longer-term talent (competence) development. See the free PM-SAT self-assessment at the IPMA-USA website.

Competence assessment and development supports key step number one, above. The irony is that certifications and development can also clearly you with the second key step: Recognize the talent you already have.

Responsibilities for Developing Talent

This brings us to the topic of developing talent. Whose job is it? In the pre-1980s, it was every Manager's most important responsibility to develop their people. All other functions, except of course, keeping your own Manager happy and informed, were of lower priority. At some point, due in part to several recessions and shrinkage of support staff, the responsibilities changed. Managers spent more of their time in meetings, justifying or marketing their organization; and only the most effective, outstanding Managers were still developing talent.

Individuals who do not take control of their own career development ultimately stop their progression, or worse, have their roles outsourced. Few Managers are accepting responsibility for fulfilling the ever-increasing demand for in-house talent. Of course, we can keep looking for it outside the Enterprise. Even then, after four years, in many Enterprises that talent needs refreshing—or replacing—your choice.

Project Managers should boost the talent orbit of every team member you work with. That way, they produce more results, better, at less cost in each new project. This team development should be a Functional Manager's responsibility, but they seldom have time for it. Do Project Managers have a lot of extra time? No, but you do a great job of overcoming impossible odds already, so why not?

The Impact of Talent

Why does talent matter, especially in Projects? There are two areas of project impact: Application Area talent and talent in the needed Project Management competences.

Application Area Talent: Team members with the appropriate talent in their disciplines is the "secret sauce" to successfully delivering the project product. In prioritizing the Vital Signs[v], the key factors that all competent teams manage, Talent—the right

Human Capital—is the one factor that counterbalances all the other Vital Signs.

Thus, you balance conflicts between Time, Cost, Risk, Quality and Scope with appropriate Talent. The right talent at the right availability and in the right timing produces higher quality results, with less scope change, faster, and at a lower cost. Of course, every other project team will try desperately to grab that talent, adding more Risk to your project.

This leads to the second of the two areas of talent impact, **Project Management**. More than your Project Managers must demonstrate competence. The situation above, where the right talent in the delivery disciplines balances the Vital Signs, also depends upon Resource Managers who demonstrate PM Competences. Thus, rewarding Managers for prioritizing competing efforts, developing their direct reports, and placing the most competent team members on the highest-priority projects, is a critical success factor for the Project Oriented Enterprise. Even an incredibly effective Project Manager cannot rescue an Enterprise from Resource Manager incompetence.

Therefore, Executives in would-be Project Oriented Enterprises have a new set of responsibilities. They must learn to develop the talent of Management ranks as well as the project teams. The first benefit is faster, more insightful decision-making. Secondly, you clarify cause-and-effect relationships between what is strategically important and which projects you launch, support, and implement. In some cases, this may require running fewer concurrent projects. However, in all cases, those projects will achieve their planned results faster, better, and at a lower total cost—not to mention the higher benefit realization you deserve.

The Role of Training

Training has a clear role in developing talent. That training must be well-managed to maximize its potential. It needs targeting, relevance, and application.
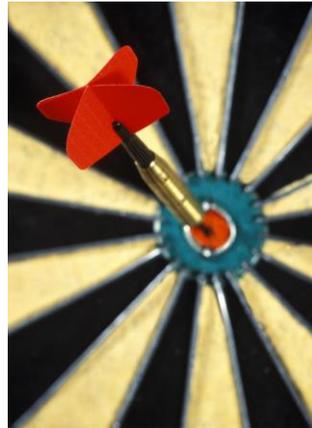
Targeting involves understanding the role/competences that require improvement or realignment. It progresses to understanding the Learning Objectives (learner outcomes) for each competence, and identifying the level of outcome you require. Bloom 2001[vi] is very useful in this targeting. While the original 1950s work on Bloom's taxonomy was great for instructional design for children, the 2001 update also makes it incredibly appropriate for adult learning.

Relevance is crucial if learning is to have a positive return. This is one reason why years of test-preparation cramming courses have had no positive impact in project performance. These PM Vendors do offer other, more useful courses, and savvy Enterprises use them wisely. Performing a relevant *Skills Needs Assessment* for the nature of the work your Talent is performing is the first step in investing your training funds wisely.

Getting away from a 5-day one-size-fits-all PM Workshop mentality is another intelligent move. This is why a few PM Training vendors offer **modular** Project Management[vii] workshops. This way, training managers can custom-configure the basic or advanced class needed to meet learner needs.

Application: In adult learning you build upon the experiences of your talent, rather than "paving over it" with all-new content. For adults, training builds the knowledge foundation for higher levels of performance. However, knowledge is like potential energy (if you remember your Physics). Potential energy *does not accomplish anything*.

You must apply the energy. Then it becomes kinetic (from Greek: action) energy. The corollary is that Knowledge, consistently applied, morphs into Skill. Knowledge that is not applied has a half-life of six weeks.

So yes, training definitely has a role in developing talent. It is not an expense, but an investment in Human Capital. But it must be the right training, well-managed, through targeting, relevance and application. Still, your talent's competence development requires more than training.

Beyond Training: Coaching and Mentoring

Measurable progress can begin with training, but based on an Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge learning model, learners need more. They need the reinforcement, recognition and rewards that cause Skills to continue to grow through application. Executive Overviews are useful in establishing short-term reinforcement, but other pressing issues can distract Executive energies. One solution is to apply internal Champions: Key Executives who serve as coaches or mentors, and who continue to "wave the flag" for project performance improvement.

Establishing PM Champions in your Enterprise is a critical success factor in institutionalizing competent Project Management. In addition, selecting the persons who will take on this responsibility is delicate. Those persons need to be respected by their peers, superiors and subordinates, and they must be high-enough in the Enterprise that they have clout or influence so their praise means something, yet low-enough so they are approachable. Position internal Executives (not external consultants) in this role. This helps perpetuate the change in the Enterprise.

The Result: you attain Project Performance Competence, the Enterprise's actualization in Project Management.

Managing, Recognizing and Retaining Talent

Clearly, recognizing and rewarding talent is one of the keys to growing it. It is also one of the keys to retaining it.

In an era when every Enterprise has Talent Scouts on the lookout for your project talent, savvy Enterprises apply strategies for retaining it. This is especially important if yours is one that is experiencing the outflow of talent resulting from retiring baby boomers.

It is also important if your Enterprise Project Culture is based on conflicting priorities, unrealistically tight deadlines, unavailable talent and progress through pressure and heroics, rather than competent PM practices.

Challenges in Managing Project Talent

It is not easy to manage top talent. Talent is finicky, temperamental, and sometimes prima donnas. Just look at young celebrity talent to see how difficult it can be. This view may provide clues for managing your Enterprise's talent. Looking at Hollywood starlets, for example, who may appear at times to be "out of control", can add insight. One key to managing talent is to continue to provide new challenges. **Those who are "topped out" may cop out**. So keep those challenges, and the resulting learning, coming.

A distinguishing characteristic between those who **could be** talent and those who **will not** is *eagerness to learn*. Some Social Styles assessment tools call this Flexibility. This eagerness to learn also relates to a trait that helps some people thrive during organizational change, while others struggle with it.

Another key is *frequent, and **increasing** rewards and recognition. If you think you are providing all that is needed, are you sure you are still getting results? For top talent, attention can be addictive, and the same amount as before no longer suffices.

Finally, just as the oceans ebb and flow, allow the work patterns of your project talent to do so as well. You do not train for an Olympic performance (a salute to Beijing 2008) by pushing yourself to exhaustion; instead, you ebb and flow (the interval training approach) to peak at the right time to achieve World Class Performance.

Conclusions

Begin your Talent Scout search internally in your Enterprise, based on role/competence requirements. Continue the search into the open market, other organizations, other locales and then other countries. An irony: Some Enterprises appear to use exactly the opposite sequence.

Once sought, found and acquired, continue developing *all* your Project Talent, because that is the most powerful project improvement that you can make. Manage that talent effectively to maximize your yield. Your Talent Scouting improvement adventure begins here, and now, using any insights you have gleaned from this article. Your continued project success depends upon it.

(See the topic-support checklist on the next page.)

A Checklist for Project Talent Management

The purpose of this checklist is to support this article with actionable items you can use to improve your success in finding, developing and managing project talent, both in the delivery disciplines, and in the PM Competences.

❑ Understand the roles your talent will play—both existing talent and those you seek.

❑ Identify the most important processes of those roles.

❑ List the competences needed for every process, and the level of competence for each, using a consistent scale.

❑ When seeking and interviewing additional talent, use scenarios from your own Enterprise to probe and explore both innate and developed competences.

❑ Identify the multiple ways one can attain or improve those needed competences in your Enterprise.

❑ Identify the purposes of competence development, whether to improve project success, increase individual work gratification, improve career progression, to recognize competence through certification, or all.

❑ Identify training needs based on this information. Use learning objectives, not just topics, to understand what the successful learner **should be able to do**.

❑ Assure that all training is targeted, relevant, and applied. Measure the results beyond "smile sheets".

❑ Establish the expectation that training is not a vacation from work, but instead is an important part of competence development and career progression.

❑ Post-training (but not immediately after, so application takes place) evaluate grasp of targeted topics.

❑ Coach in areas where grasp falls short of targets. Note that often the environment, not the learning, is the limit to competent application. Engage managers.

❑ Recognize and reward successful application. While the half-life of skills is longer than knowledge, skills also atrophy if not applied and rewarded.

❑ Coach and Mentor your Talent in their interpersonal skills. Engage coaches or mentors who demonstrate those skills. Provide time for each for this coaching.

❑ Recognize and seek certifications that recognize performance. This is especially important in projects, where performance competence amplifies the performance of everyone it touches.

❑ Buddy-up fresh talent with retiring talent so you do not lose their knowledge and experience. This is not a cost, but rather an intelligent investment.

❑ Regard Human Capital as your most valuable economic resource, and demonstrate that regard daily.

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, PMP, *the PM Performance Coach*, is CEO of ProjectExperts®, a global Program and Project Management consulting, methods, tools and Learning consultancy.

A co-founder and past President of IPMA-USA, Stacy has been an officer in IPMA®, the International Project Management Association. In 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow. As well, he has contributed to the success of Project Management Institute since 1983.

A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and PM consultant since 1982, he improves Enterprise or project team PM competence, efficiency, and Performance. Mr. Goff speaks at industry events, offers coaching and consulting services, and presents workshops of great interest to Executives, Managers, Project Managers and leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors.

His Project Management tools and methods are used by Government Agencies, Enterprises, Consultancies, and individuals on six continents. He combines his PM Process insights with wide-ranging experience in projects and programs, and with sensitivity for the human aspects of projects.

The result: Measurably increased *PM Performance--* **Personal, Project, Program, and Portfolio Performance**.

References

[i] See our 2006 IPMA China World Congress paper, *Distinguishing PM Competence in Training and Development*, in the Articles section of the ProjectExperts.com website

[ii] IPMA is the International Project Management Association, the world's first professional Project Management society. Learn more about IPMA at www.ipma.ch.

[iii] IPMA-USA is the IPMA Member Association for the USA. Learn more about us at www.ipma-usa.org.

[iv] NCB is the USA's National Competence Baseline for the USA, describing the elements of PM competence in three areas, Technical, Contextual, and Behavioral.

[v] For 25 years, we have used the term Vital Signs to describe the elements competent Project Managers prioritize, measure and manage. See the articles *Project Levers and Gauges*, and *Prioritizing the Vital Signs* at ProjectExperts.com.

[vi] Bloom 2001 refers to *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing*, by Lorin W. Anderson & David R. Krathwohl, an intern forty-five years earlier for the original 1956 Bloom's Taxonomy edition. Published by Longman, 2001.

[vii] The author's company, ProjectExperts, offers a fully-customizable Modular Project Management® curriculum.