

BE SURE – THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFIDENCE IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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1. ABSTRACT

Beliefs have a strong physiological impact on the human behavior. They have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect. People's beliefs usually come true, because they act as if those beliefs would be true. Thus, it helps them to reach their goals.

Right beliefs are important in the project management. It is especially important that project managers believe in their projects and their teams. Project managers set the goals of the project and have a strong influence on the team spirit and attitude. They guide the team in daily problem-solving situations. The confidence in the project - or the lack of it - plays an important role in all of these activities, and in many cases it makes the difference between the success and the failure.

Acting confident is not enough. If project managers are not confident enough, they must seek the confidence by evaluating the project risk and success factors, finding motivation for the project, and seek support from team members and stakeholders. A portion of autosuggestion is needed, also.

2. KEYWORDS

Project management, beliefs, people management, confidence, optimism, leadership, positive mindset

3. INTRODUCTION

In January 2004, our company (F-Secure corporation) redefined our slogan to "BE SURE": Our customers can be confident when they have installed our security products, consisting of anti-virus, firewall, intrusion prevention, anti-spam, application control and parental control solutions.

We were all asked to think about what this means in our daily work, so I started to think about confidence in the project management. Looking back on previous experiences, I started to realize the importance of the project manager who believes in the project.

4. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF (THE RIGHT) BELIEFS

I have read some literature about Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). The NLP emphasizes the impact that beliefs have on the behavior, and the importance of having the right beliefs [1].

Beliefs have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect. One example of this is the Pygmalion effect, where a group of students was divided into two groups. Both groups had the same average IQ, but teachers were told that one of the groups had a very high IQ. Naturally, this raised the expectations for this group. Even though the only difference between the groups were teachers' beliefs and expectations, the "high IQ" group performed much better in tests. [2]

The Placebo effect is a similar example from the field of medicine. People have been cured when they have just believed that they get a super-medicine, when in fact they have been given only a placebo without any effect at all [3].

A reason for the self-fulfilling prophecy effect is that beliefs guide the behavior. People act as if their beliefs would be true [1]. Therefore, negative beliefs limit people's capabilities a lot. If people think they cannot do something, then their mind is expecting a failure and unconsciously this will direct their actions. Most probably, they will not really do their best: Why really bother when the failure is inevitable? In the worst case, they will not try at all. Even if they try, there is a big risk that when the first problem arises they interpret it as a confirmation for their failure in the attempt that was doomed in the first place. They might easily give up. You probably have experiences from such situations yourself.

Positive beliefs, on the other hand, will enhance personal capabilities. If people are sure that they will succeed, they are energized and enthusiastic. They will eagerly do their best and make sure that they fully utilize all their skills and resources. Furthermore, positive beliefs challenge brains to seek and produce

solutions to emerging problems, as they know (believe) that there are a lot of solutions out there just waiting to be found. The outcome is that if one solution is not good enough, people try another until a successful one is found.

“They are able because they think they are able.”

Virgil (70-19 bc)

The belief and the resulting success/failure will also work as a reference for future actions. Anthony Robbins presents the following feedback loop: Beliefs/Attitude \Rightarrow Potential \Rightarrow Action \Rightarrow Result \Rightarrow Belief/Attitude [4]. Beliefs and attitude (which are very closely linked together) will affect the potential people have (or think they have). This guides their actions and behavior, which leads into results. The result will then strengthen the previous beliefs even more. If the beliefs were negative, people will be even more convinced that a similar attempt will be a failure the next time also and so it has a negative belief-behavior spiral effect. On the other hand, with positive beliefs the success will give a track record that will strengthen people’s beliefs in their potential even more (a positive behavior-belief spiral). People with positive attitude are more likely to get the expected result. They are convinced that they will reach the result sooner or later. This motivates them to try different actions until they reach their goal.

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT BELIEFS IN THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The project manager’s beliefs and actions based on those beliefs are important for the success of the project in several ways. I would highlight at least the following areas:

- Attitude and spirit shaper of the whole team
- Problem solving attitude
- The Pygmalion effect
- Goal setting

The project manager is the attitude setter of the whole team, both directly and indirectly. Beliefs affect the behavior of one person. With a team, the effect is multiplied by the amount of team members.

If the project manager does not believe in his project, it can be seen in the way he coaches the team, or rather in the lack of coaching. The project manager will have a hard time to find the energy to do coaching if he is not convinced about the project himself. Coaching, or the lack of it, will have a great impact on the success and the general team spirit [5]. Without coaching, people feel that they work in a project that no one believes in or cares about. With a confident project manager driving the project, the team members feel that they are working in an exciting project and have an enthusiastic leader that helps them forward in their everyday work.

The project manager’s confidence has indirect effects, also. Team members keep an eye on their project manager. They will notice expressions and the body language. If the project manager comes to work every morning looking troubled, team members will be worried as well for sure. On the other hand, a smiling project manager who looks confident lightens up the team and makes them feel safe. The project manager’s enthusiasm is soon transmitted to the whole team. So keep smiling, the team is watching you!

The atmosphere in the project is also more likely to be positive and relaxed overall, if the team members and their manager believes in what they are doing. A relaxed, positive team spirit enables creativity and motivation. It also reduces the risk of stress and burnouts.

Additionally, beliefs affect the communication style, which project manager uses. For example, a pessimistic project manager could use words like “Difficulties”, “Crises”, “Threats” and “Dead ends”, while an optimistic project manager would talk about “Challenges”, “Urgent situations”, “Opportunities” and “Turning points” instead. These words send out very different signals to the team members and very much affect how they look at the situation or respond to a sudden change.

The attitude to look at problems is very closely related to vocabulary. The typical software project manager will face problems or challenges most likely every day. His beliefs are then crucial to how he reacts to these problems. Does he feel that each problem is just another proof that his already impossible project should have been never launched? In this case, his response is probably something between resignation and a half-hearted attempt to solve it. His team will most probably follow his example.

The confident project manager knows that challenges (note the word he uses) belong to everyday life of software projects. He is confident that he and his team will be able to solve problems and sees them as just another opportunity for the team to learn and develop. Furthermore, the positive attitude engages the

creativity of each team member and enables them to look at the problem from different angles, which helps them to come up with a wide range of alternatives and solutions.

“Problems are only opportunities in working clothes.”

--Henry J. Kaiser

As another area of the project success, we have the Pygmalion effect [2] mentioned earlier. Not only does the project manager need to believe in his project, but it is very important that he believes in his team, also. Due to the Pygmalion effect, the project manager unconsciously treats team members according to his beliefs and they respond correspondingly. A project manager who thinks he has a team of senior top performers treats them as such. So, team members do their best to meet these expectations and the self-fulfilling prophecy comes into effect. They earn the given trust. Vice versa, if the project manager treats team members like inexperienced novices - over-guides their work or shows that he does not trust them - it affects their performance negatively [5].

Last but not least, we have the goal setting in which the project manager typically plays a very central role. Planning and goal setting are phases in the project that determine what the project aims to achieve and setting the right goals is crucial. A pessimistic project manager feels that goals, which are set for the project, are very hard to begin with so most probably he tries to reduce the ambition level of planned goals to have some chance of getting even the half of the project scope done. On the other hand, the confident project manager challenges both himself and his team to set high goals and inspires the team to reach them.

6. GETTING CONFIDENT

Now we have seen the importance of confidence, but what should you do as the project manager if you do not feel confident about your project? There can be several underlying reasons for this: unrealistic goals or schedule, inexperienced team, unstable or unclear requirements, and so on.

Of course, you could try to act confident. In this case, you would have to be a very good actor and you should remember to keep doing so all the time, since team members are watching you - also when you least expect it. Most likely the acting takes a lot of unnecessary energy from you and it does not replace the real excitement and engagement that a truly confident project manager has. So, acting might work as a first aid, but you still need the real confidence.

Naturally, the first step to get the real confidence in the project is to address the underlying problems that cause doubts about it: negotiate goals or the schedule, train the team, clarify the requirements and so on. If this is possible, it is a quite straightforward approach.

As a second step, I would suggest to do risk analyses. Try to schedule the biggest risks to the beginning of the project. Everyone can be more confident once those high-risk issues have been eliminated.

The next step would be to raise your own motivation. When you are well motivated and excited, it is easier to believe in your project. A support from external stakeholders can be helpful in here. Find out the following:

- Why the project is needed? What benefits it will bring to your company?
- What benefits will this bring to the end customers?
- What opportunities does this bring to you and to your team? What new things or technology can you learn? What kind of experience can you gain?
- Will there be a reward if you are successful?

If you are not confident about your team, sit down with them. Get to know them and find out what they have done earlier and their experience level. Also, seek their support for the project and involve them in it. Most probably you will be impressed with what you hear and you will find it easier to trust them.

Furthermore, list the success factors you have in your project. Try to find as many as possible together with your team. When all success factors are written down, you can all see positive sides of the project.

Finally, try the autosuggestion. Go through all the benefits, opportunities and success factors by yourself. Create a positive mental image of a successful project. If nothing else helps, pretend that you believe that the project is possible and act accordingly. After a while, you will notice the self-fulfilling prophecy effect and your confidence will rise.

I have tried and noticed that the autosuggestion works on myself. A short time back, we had one very challenging project, which had a quite unrealistic schedule. Still, it was not in our power to affect this

schedule, due to external commitments. We forced ourselves to believe in the project. This was hard in the beginning, but it became easier and easier as we progressed. The belief encouraged us to look for alternatives and in the end, we were able to pull through the project successfully. Of course, we also had an excellent team to do the work. A lot that I have written in this paper is based on experiences gained from that project.

7. A FEW WORDS OF WARNING

Strong beliefs alone will not make a project successful. Proper planning, project management discipline and a software development process all need to be in place. This has been an assumption for everything I have written. Proper planning is also a good way to become more confident.

Even if optimism is good in the goal setting, be careful with over-optimism. Unrealistic goals do not motivate people and are not met likely [5][6]. You might set up challenging goals, but make sure you know where you can cut corners, if the equation becomes impossible. If you look at the project management triangle with Scope (including Quality) – Resources (Budget) and Schedule at the corners, you need to know what can and cannot be negotiated.

When challenging people to reach optimistic goals, be careful not to pressure them too much. The idea is not that they should put in more hours and start doing longer working days. Instead, inspire them to be creative about solutions. Tell them that you think the goals are possible and you need to figure out how to achieve them together. Convince team members and then brainstorm to find alternatives. Try different angles and approaches until you get satisfying results.

8. HOW MY BELIEFS AFFECTED WRITING THIS PAPER

While I was writing this paper I once more faced a confidence problem. I doubted whether I will be able to write this paper by the given submission deadline. I was involved in a pair of hectic projects, which took most of my working time. At home, our newborn baby daughter kept our family awake during nights, which did not help the situation in any way.

I was almost ready to give up writing this paper, as I *believed* that I could not do it. Then it struck me that the task was down to my beliefs and I realized that those beliefs would make it or break it. This gave me my inspiration back. By writing this paper, I would prove that beliefs make a difference, which would give me an excellent angle to look at the problem. Then I started to convince myself, which was the turning point. The writing started to progress and my confidence rose as the text evolved.

9. CONCLUSION

I will summarize the above-discussed matters into the following conclusions:

- Beliefs guide behavior. Due to the self-fulfilling prophecy effect, it is very important that project managers believe in their projects and in their project teams (The Pygmalion effect).
- Project managers' attitudes and beliefs have a great impact on the whole project and the rest of the team. This is true for the team spirit / attitude, goal setting and problem solving approach.
- If project managers are not confident about the project when it starts, they must seek that confidence. To do this, they must find out the cause for the uncertainty, list the project risks and success factors and seek the support both from their team and the stakeholders. Autosuggestion has proven to be helpful, also.
- Setting optimistic goals should be done so that something can be traded off later, if needed. The focus should be on finding creative solutions with a positive team spirit.

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Finally, I would like to wish you good luck with your projects! Have faith in your projects and your team members. You will make it!

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