

Domain experience: a double edged sword

Wherever we work the question is posed - 'should the Project Manager have domain experience?' That is should the Project Manager for a construction project be a qualified civil engineer who has done one before? Or alternatively should the Project Manager for an IT system have previous experience as a business analyst or programmer? And so on.

This is not a new question; the notion of the universal Project Manager who has all the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to manage a project in any sector, in any context has been around for many years and it is true that some people are capable of such 'go anywhere, do anything' project management. Such people have all the ingredients needed to engage with a situation, set objectives and lead a team of experts to success in achieving those objectives. For those people who are not there yet, there is a multitude of support available to identify gaps in knowledge, skills and attitudes and to provide development to fill the gaps.

The degree to which people agree in principle with the notion of the universal Project Manager is not the issue. In practice, people are appointed to lead projects as Project Manager because they are deemed to be the best available option at the time. The judgement of 'best' is almost always made in part on whether the person has relevant domain experience, i.e. **'has this person done something like this in a company like ours before'. This experience can carry much more weight in the decision making process than other success factors for effective project management, e.g. 'does the person have a track record of building confidence and trust in a team'.** As a result, most Project Managers have domain experience and this then becomes a 'double-edged sword'.

The upside of this doubled-edged sword is that the **domain experience gives Project Managers a short-cut to respect from others in the team and gives a degree of confidence around the project that 'the Project Manager knows what he/she is doing'.** That the Project Manager may only actually know what they're doing in a technical/domain sense and may not have a clue about effective scope, quality, time, cost, risk, communication, procurement etc. management seems not to be relevant in these circumstances.

The downside is that a Project Manager who has domain experience may well be lulled into thinking that this will get them through and they can short-cut the need for project management processes and skills. Our experience says that they are wrong, they may be lucky but that's about it.

The domain experience question poses a real dilemma, so what's the answer? We think that some guidance comes from considering the Project Manager's source of power. Mainstream management literature differentiates between the different sources of power that a person can have in a situation. Using an electrical power analogy, this source of a person's power then gives them the potential to influence others or an outcome. The power does not provide the result, only the potential to do so.

A Project Manager's power may come from:

- **Physical or coercive power (the stick)** - unlikely in most of our workplaces we'd suggest and hope.
- **Resource or reward power (the carrot)** - only really the case if the Project Manager is also the line manager or has significant influence over line type 'pay and ration' decisions.

- **Position or legitimate power** - exists if the appointment of the Project Manager is clear and roles and responsibilities are outlined, but little potential to influence comes from such power unless the organisational culture is very hierarchical and 'position' or rank sensitive.
- **Expert power** - domain experience providing confidence that the Project Manager 'knows what they're doing and can't be fooled'.
- **Personal or referent power** - the power of the person, their character and ability to win hearts and minds.

It seems to us that the whole question around domain experience actually comes down to two things - power, or the potential to influence people to achieve a successful outcome and credibility, the ability to be confident and to win confidence in advance of results.

In a world where the stick is rightly absent and the carrot has limited buying power, the Project Manager has to rely on their position, their expertise and their interpersonal skills. The expertise that is most likely to win them early credibility is domain expertise. Project managers with a clear remit, expertise in project management and the interpersonal skills to win hearts and minds do very well without any domain experience but domain experience gives everyone else confidence in the person before they start.

And so the double-edged sword continues.

Things will only change when people can be credible based on proven project management expertise and capability. Until then the domain expertise illusion will prevail with all the associated downsides caused by people relying on domain rather than project management to get the job done.

To read more Lucid Thoughts from Lucidus Consulting, please visit our website www.lucidusconsulting.com