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Values and ethics
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Behavioural competence elements and influencing

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1. Introduction

Project managers are in the influencing business. They do not themselves create, develop, produce, buy or sell products and services. They orchestrate – or in others words: they influence what others do in order to get projects completed.

Influencing others basically either means directing them (i.e. giving them instructions and orders), persuading them, or negotiating with them. We will therefore briefly review the major characteristics of those three levers of influence.

Competence in directing, persuading and negotiating is mostly of behavioural nature. Taking the third above-mentioned form of influencing as an example, we will review the competence elements enabling project managers to negotiate successfully and compare them with those listed in the IPMA Competence Baseline Version 3.0 (ICB Version 3.0).

Finally, we will argue that organizing competence elements mainly along the lines of directing, persuading and negotiating could help streamline and structure in a more logical way the ICB Version 3.0 list of behavioural competences.

2. Strategies of influence

To make sure that others (project team members, sponsors, subcontractors, etc.) really do what needs to be done in an effective way, project managers have three levers at their disposal:

- Within usually rather narrow limits, they can give orders or instructions which must then be carried out. The authority to direct is normally based on pre-established rules (e.g.: job description, organizational charts, etc.). Within this organizational framework, orders and instructions will in general be followed without any need for further convincing or negotiation. What matters when giving orders, is only that such orders are accurately and completely executed. Orders issued must therefore be clear, non-equivocal and complete.

- They can try to persuade others, thereby ensuring that those others come to do what they are being asked to do out of their own conviction. Persuasion is called for when a project manager cannot rely on the power of authority, but must still find a way to convince others to do something whereby: (a) what needs to be done is non-negotiable or (b) negotiating about it would have severe disadvantages such as unacceptable

delays. Persuading is to a large extent a monologue and can be considered as the art of sending messages.

▪ They can negotiate with others. Negotiation is called for when a process of joint problem solving is more promising than taking unilateral decisions and implementing them through coercion or persuasion. As opposed to persuading, negotiating is in essence a dialogue. When negotiating, receiving messages (asking questions, listening, understanding) is as important as sending messages – and maybe even more important. In this sense, negotiating means at the same time influencing the other party and being influenced by the other party.

3. Competence Elements in Negotiation

When negotiating, a key consideration is that success or failure is not only determined by the complexity and contentiousness of the issues to be resolved (content), but also to a large extent by the way the parties negotiate together (process). Research conducted in the framework of the Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard University has shown that negotiation processes can be divided in six sub-processes:

1. Working relationship between the parties (key question: are the parties able to have a meaningful dialogue and to design an efficient decision-making process?)

2. Perceptions and points of view (key question: how do the parties explore their respective points of view and how do they deal with different perceptions?)

3. Motivations (key question: how do the parties explore their respective motivations – positional bargaining vs. interest-based negotiating – and how far does each party take the needs of the other party into consideration?)

4. Creating value (key question: are the parties able to creatively develop mutual gains?)

5. Claiming value (key question: how do the parties resolve their conflicting interests?)

6. Alternatives (key question: which role is being played by the respective alternatives to a negotiated agreement?)

If the goal of negotiating pursued by project managers is to end up with agreements which (a) create as much added value as possible for the sake of the project, and (b) can be viewed as well-founded and fair by all stakeholders, then the list of abilities and competence elements required could look as follows:

- Ability to develop and maintain a well functioning working relationship with the other party:
  - Ability to disentangle issues of substance and people-related problems / Ability to consciously manage the process separately from dealing with the substance
  - Ability to foster good communication: clarity of expression, active listening skills (incl. good questioning skills), openness
  - Ability to build up mutual trust: reliability, trustworthiness
  - Ability to express one's own emotions adequately
  - Ability to react adequately to the emotions of the others: empathy
- Ability to identify and respect different perceptions:
  - Active listening skills, curiosity
  - Openness, tolerance
  - Empathy
- Interest-based negotiating (vs. positional bargaining):
  - Ability to express and defend one's own underlying interests clearly and with determination
  - Readiness to take the underlying interests of the other party into due consideration: curiosity, openness, respect
- Ability to develop mutual gains:
  - Creativity, i.e. ability to contribute to the development of ideas leading to solutions which satisfy the interests of both sides
  - Ability to design productive brainstorming processes
- Ability to resolve conflicting interests
  - Concern for fairness (as opposed to arbitrariness)
  - Ability to identify and propose convincing standards of legitimacy
- Alternatives to negotiated agreements
  - Prudence, i.e.: careful contingency planning
  - Ability to realistically assess the advantages and disadvantages of available alternatives on both sides
  - Determination not to accept agreements which, in view of one's own interests, are less attractive than the best available alternative

How does this compare with ICB Version 3.0?

Several parallels can be draw between this list of abilities and competence elements and the adequate behaviours described in the section 2.11 of ICB Version 3.0:

Abilities and competence elements	Adequate behaviours as listed in ICB Version 3.0
Working relationship	Actively helps to avoid and correct inappropriate behavior
	Acts to engender longer-term business or work relations
	Can express himself effectively and clearly; avoids unnecessary detail
	Creates the right ambiance for negotiation
	Negotiates hard at the content level but maintains a positive personal relationship
Perceptions and points of view	Explores interests and perceptions to find constructive solutions
	Tries to understand the other's position and perspective; listens carefully
Motivations	Is honest and fair about his own interests and objectives
	Aims for win : win situations for both parties
	Respects the other's claims and proposals (vs. tries to force the other party to accept his position)
	Explores interests and perceptions to find constructive solutions
Creating value	Aims for win : win situations for both parties
	Explores interests and perceptions to find constructive solutions
Claiming value	Negotiates fairly and in a well-balanced way
Alternatives	Defines negotiation objectives and scenarios

Table 1: Abilities, competence elements and adequate behaviours

In spite of those parallels, ICB Version 3.0 does not provide a clear and precise list of negotiation-related behavioural competences which would enable to assess relatively easily the negotiation abilities of a project manager. Furthermore: (a) the first adequate behavior listed is a truism: "Has the ability to negotiate and the stamina to carry the process through to a successful conclusion"; (b) there is an ample body of literature showing that the above-mentioned sub-processes are a better basis for structuring effective and high-quality negotiations than the process steps listed in section 2.11 of ICB Version 3.0.

4. Streamlining and structuring

The overall list of behavioural competences in ICB3 neither does provide a clear guidance. The reasoning behind the inclusion or exclusion of competence elements in the ICB Version 3.0 list is not identifiable:

- The difference between "consultation" (section 2.10) and "negotiation" (section 2.11) is not obvious. The same is true as far as "assertiveness" (section 2.04) and "result orientation" (section 2.08) are concerned.

- The competence element "conflict & crisis" (section 2.12) combines two situations which do not require the same management skills. The management of crises certainly involves less negotiating and more directing than the resolution of conflicts.

- One could easily argue that discipline, energy, enthusiasm, perseverance, political savvy, self-confidence and many other skills or traits (which are not listed) are at least as important as "engagement & motivation" (section 2.02), "self-control" (section 2.03), "relaxation" (2.08), etc.

- "Leadership" (section 2.01) is an overriding competence which most probably encompasses all other behavioural competence elements.

If the major contribution of project managers lies in orchestrating what other people do, most behavioural competences expected from them should relate to influencing processes. In addition to highly developed skills in influencing others, one may also expect from project managers good skills in influencing themselves – i.e.: good self-management skills. Having addressed those two areas, the only remaining competence elements listed in ICB Version 3.0 would be "Efficiency" and "Ethics". It might indeed make sense to address them separately, as efficiency is about what should be done and how, whereas ethics is about what ought to be done and why.

A possible way to structure and streamline the list of behavioural competences could therefore be as shown in the Table 2 on the next page.

As we have seen above, the basic competence elements of "good" negotiation skills can be described quite precisely. Neuroscience research even shows that relatively fuzzy notions such as empathy can be characterized: empathy is (a) the cognitive capacity to take the perspective of another person, to transpose oneself imaginatively into his or her feeling and thinking, to mentally simulate the other's perspective using one's own brain, and (b) the capacity of being aware of one's own emotions and feelings, and to reflect on them – i.e. (paradoxically): the ability to disentangle oneself from the other person, to maintain a sense of whose feelings belong to whom.

Leadership (would incorporate / replace "Engagement & motivation")		
Influencing skills	Self-management skills	Other skills
• Directing skills • Persuasion skills • Negotiation skills		• Efficiency (section 2.09) • Ethics (section 2.15)
(would incorporate / replace "assertiveness", "openness", "creativity", "consultation", "conflict & crisis", "reliability" and "values appreciation")	(would incorporate / replace the "self-control" and "relaxation")	(would incorporate / replace "Result orientation")

Table 2: Structuring and streamlining the behavioural competences

Most probably, the same could be done in order to list the basic competence elements of "good" directing and "good" persuading.

5. Conclusions

ICB Version 3.0 reflects the need perceived in the project management world of a comprehensive description of adequate standards of professional behavior.

As far as behavioural competences are concerned, ICB Version 3.0 goes way beyond listing so-called soft skills and attempts to define rigorous standards and guidelines.

This attempt is very welcome, but could be pursued even further. We have shown that most ICB Version 3.0 behavioural competence elements could be logically and usefully consolidated under three strategies of influence: directing, persuading and negotiating. Taking negotiation as an example, we have further shown that the relevant competence elements can be described quite precisely and related to clear process steps.

A more structured list of behavioural elements would further increase the practical value of the IPMA certification system.

6. Acknowledgment

The first part of this article (Strategies of influence) is based on an unpublished text written by my colleague Dr. Claudio Weiss: "Directing, Persuading, Negotiating – How Are These Three Disciplines Different and When Should They Be Employed?" (for more information on the author, see: www.awareman.ch).

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