



What is a good project manager? An Aristotelian perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to take a critical look at the question “what is a competent project manager?” and bring some fresh added-value insights. This leads us to analyze the definitions, and assessment approaches of project manager competence. Three major standards as prescribed by PMI, IPMA, and GAPPS are considered for review from an attribute-based and performance-based approach and from a deontological and consequentialist ethics perspectives. Two fundamental tensions are identified: an ethical tension between the standards and the related competence assessment frameworks and a tension between attribute and performance-based approaches. Aristotelian ethical and practical philosophy is brought in to reconcile these differences. Considering ethics of character that rises beyond the normative deontological and consequentialist perspectives is suggested. Taking the mediating role of praxis and phronêsis between theory and practice into consideration is advocated to resolve the tension between performance and attribute-based approaches to competence assessment.

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1. Setting the scene: competent PM, and competence assessment

1.1. An increasing need for competent PM

For sixty years, organizations have increasingly been using projects and programs to achieve their strategic objectives. Nowadays about 25% of global economic activity takes place as projects (World Bank, 2012)¹. To support the resulting need for the development of competent project managers (PMs), over time professional bodies such as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) and the Project Management

Institute (PMI), respectively created in 1965 and 1969, have established standards and related professional certification systems (IPMA framework since 1987, and PMP[®], since 1984). This is evidenced in the exponential growth in the number of certified project managers (PMs — IPMA Certification Yearbook, 2012; PMI Today, September 2013). Standards and credentials supported by professional bodies are developed based on identified ‘best practice’ within the profession. However, delineating what is a good project manager and the level of performance at which s/he is expected to perform is still a burning issue (e.g. Cicmil, 2006; Hodgson, 2002; Lalonde et al., 2012). For the purposes of this paper we refer to performance in relation to the PM’s actions, not to the overall performance of a project even though the two may be related. We assume that assessing the competencies of PMs enables to infer their level of performance in his/her present and future role (Crawford, 2005, p. 9). This leads us to suggest two questions for further investigation: “what is a competent project manager?” and “how do we assess the competence of project managers?”

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¹ From World Bank Indicators web site url <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.GDI.TOTL.ZS>, accessed on 31 March 2012.

1.2. Defining competence

We use Crawford's definition of PM competence, broken down into two dimensions: attribute-based and competence-based.

The attribute-based dimension of competence comprises Input and Personal competencies:

1. Input competencies are defined as *“the knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities that a person brings to a job”* (Crawford, 2005, pp. 8–9). Knowledge is captured in bodies of knowledge (information pertinent to specific content areas) and skills as abilities to perform certain physical or mental tasks through qualification and experience;
2. Personal competencies are defined as *“the core personality characteristics underlying a person's capability to do a job”* (Crawford, 2005, pp. 8–9). Personality traits, attitudes and behaviors represent these core personality characteristics;

The performance-based dimension of competence relies on Output competencies:

3. Output competencies are defined as *“the ability to perform the activities within an occupational area to the levels of performance expected in employment”* (Crawford, 2005, pp. 8–9). Demonstrable performance and use of project management practices in the workplace characterize this ability.

Based on these definitions, a competent project manager is the one who: possesses some attributes to fulfill her/his role; and will demonstrate a certain level of performance. The attributes and performance standards are defined and published by professional bodies such as the Project Management Institute (PMBOK® Guide, PMI, 2013a), the International Project Management Association (IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB), IPMA, 2006), and the Global Alliance for Project Management Standards (GAPPS Project and Program Manager Standards; GAPPS, 2007). PMI's PMBOK® and IPMA's ICB have been mainly developed along the attribute-based dimension, whilst GAPPS' standards have been mainly developed along the performance-based dimension².

For attribute-based standards (such as PMI), the certification examination is designed to reflect tasks and activities a PM is expected to perform on the job (based on PMBOK®). Furthermore, the certification requires a defined length of professional experience, depending on the academic credentials of the applicant. The IPMA certification process is structured in four levels, with different educational and experience prerequisites. The certification process involves a written examination, and depending on the certification level, a report (documenting demonstrable performance), a workshop, and an interview. Therefore, whilst the PMI and IPMA standards do

not include specifically performance-based criteria (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2), their certification processes attempt to capture elements of performance. In other words, the transition from standard to certification implies a shift from “what is a competent PM?” to “what does a competent PM do?” The performance-based approach is exemplified by the GAPPS frameworks (2007, 2011). Based on the role descriptions (what does a competent PM), and considering possible differentiations with regard to breadth of responsibility and management complexity, the GAPPS frameworks are defining 1) units of competency, i.e. specific areas of professional performance in the workplace, 2) elements of competency, i.e. key components of work performance within a unit, and 3) performance criteria, i.e. type and level of performance required to demonstrate competence in each element based on observable results and actions (GAPPS, 2007, p. 2; 2011, p. 2).

1.3. Competence and ethics

A competent PM is expected to perform at or above a certain level of performance. One anticipates s/he will do the “right” things “right”, and “get things done” – *“At its most fundamental, project management is about people getting things done”* (Dr Martin Barnes, APM President 2003–2012, APM web site, <http://www.apm.org.uk/WhatIsPM>, accessed 6 March 2014) – and deliver “good” outcomes. Expectations about what a PM ought to do in his/her duty (“right” with the idea of compliance) are supported by the general concept of deontology, while the focus is on getting the “good” outcome, by the concept of consequentialism (doing “right” meaning here getting things done, i.e. the “good” outcome). Therefore, defining what is a competent PM and how to assess his/her competence lead to ethical questions such as what are “right” actions and “good” outcomes. These questions are fundamental, as each normative ethic (deontological and consequentialist) carries its own limitations (Duska, 1993, p. 228). On the one hand, the question of arbitrage and conflict of duty (which is the “right” duty, towards which stakeholder?), on the other hand, the relation between means and ends (“the ends justify the means”). As we demonstrate below, we argue that moving from these normative ethics to an Aristotelian ethic of character provides a more holistic ground to answering in a practical way our two initial questions. Thus, the paradigmatic and ethical underpinnings of standards and assessments need to be studied. It is important to address these questions as they have implications for communities of practitioners and scholars who collectively reflect to develop meaningful practices and routines. This in turn is important to achieve the “end purpose” i.e. both doing “right” things “right” and delivering “good” outcomes to benefit stakeholders (GAPPS, 2007, p. 4; GAPPS, 2011, p. 5; IPMA, 2006, p. 2–3; PMI, 2006, p. 1).

In summary, addressing the question “what is a competent PM” leads us to discuss 1) the ethical foundations of what being competent means, 2) the consequences for the assessment of competence, and 3) the underlying perspectives supporting standards. We critically discuss these three aspects for GAPPS, IPMA and PMI in the next section of this article. Then, from

² We have selected these three sets as they have been published by long-established bodies and account for a large number of credentialed project managers.

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