



When narcissism drives project champions: A review and research agenda

Jeffrey K. Pinto^{*}, Peerasit Patanakul

Black School of Business, Penn State — Erie, Erie, PA 16563, United States

Received 11 November 2014; received in revised form 12 January 2015; accepted 15 January 2015
Available online 27 January 2015

Abstract

Narcissism is a psychological state or personality disorder that is characterized by high self-regard and desire for personal aggrandizement. In an organization setting, narcissistic behavior of individuals can impact a number of operational initiatives, including new product development and other project ventures. As many projects in an organization receive sponsorship from key executives, the question must be considered: do narcissistic behaviors in project champions have any impact on the selection and governance of these projects? The purpose of this paper is to investigate the potential impact on projects of narcissism in project champions. In particular, the impacts of narcissistic behavior on project choices and project governance were investigated. Propositions for future research are presented. Challenges and suggested methodologies for studying narcissism and championing behavior are also discussed. Finally, we offer an agenda for future research.
© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Narcissism; Champions; Project sponsors

1. Introduction

“Public works projects make sense when they fill well-documented needs. When they don’t, they are just political ego trips.”

Dan Walters (2012), commenting on Governor Jerry Brown’s support of the California High-Speed Rail Project.

While former Apple CEO Steven Jobs’ list of product successes was dizzying in its breadth, he did endure his share of failures along the way. Many of these products were viewed internally as pet projects that had Jobs’ support from the beginning. Thus, they were often not seriously questioned, were pushed to launch, and quietly shelved or dismantled after commercial failure. The Lisa failure in early 1983 ended up costing Apple \$50 million in hardware and over \$100 million in development, selling less than 10,000 units.

NeXT, the ROKR phone, and MobileMe are all initiatives that Jobs spearheaded, that were viewed as his pet projects and heavily supported, and all failed spectacularly. The infamous Apple Newton was a personal project of Jobs’ successor and former Apple CEO John Sculley, who was largely responsible for engineering Jobs’ departure. When Jobs returned he eventually axed the Newton. Jobs developed a penchant for either ridiculing new product ideas that were not his, or if he saw some value in them, claiming ownership of them, ignoring the contributions of the idea’s originator, and rapidly pushing them through the company’s development process (Isaacson, 2011).

Stories such as these raise an important question about how successful many sponsored projects are; that is, those projects that are commonly understood by other members of the organization or key project stakeholders to have a visible/identifiable project champion. In this study, project champions are considered “project advocates” or “policy entrepreneurs” who seek to influence other people in their organization regarding an issue or project (Drumwright, 1994; Gattiker and Carter, 2010). Many researchers indicate that these championing behaviors are important when

^{*} Corresponding author at: Burke Building, Penn State Erie, Erie PA 16563.
E-mail addresses: jkp4@psu.edu (J.K. Pinto), pxp25@psu.edu (P. Patanakul).

sponsoring a project (see e.g., Bryde, 2008). Thus, although the terms “champion” and “sponsor” are sometimes used interchangeably, others suggest that *championing behavior* is one responsibility that sponsors assume in supporting organizational projects. Another term sometimes used is that of the “project owner,” although an owner may simply be synonymous with the contracting organization itself, rather than an individual directly engaging in championing behavior. For the balance of this paper, we will employ the “champion” term to refer to project sponsors and “championing behavior” to involve active project advocacy. Both the academic and practitioner literatures are filled with articles suggesting that champions are critical for project success (see, for example, Bourne, 2012 or Project Management Institute, n.d.) and, indeed, a number of research studies seem to bear out this link (cf. Boonstra, 2013; Bryde, 2008). Studies have confirmed the relationship between the behaviors of project champions and the greater likelihood of their project’s successful completion (e.g., Pinto and Slevin, 1988). As a result, it has become an article of faith that project teams should actively seek out the support of a champion; someone who can serve on behalf of the project as a representative to critical stakeholders. These assumptions beg a follow-on question, however; what if the champion is wrong. Worse, what if the motives or the psychological state of the project champion is disordered to the degree that their championing behavior is not about project success but is, in fact, all about them? Such a psychological state or personality disorder is referred to as “narcissism.”

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the potential impact on projects of narcissism in champions. In particular, we ask two questions. The first question is “do narcissistic behaviors in project champions have any effect on the choice of projects they decide to support?” The second question is “do narcissistic behaviors of project champions have any effect on the way they govern the project?” In recent years, the study of narcissism in organizations, particularly at the executive level, has become an increasingly fruitful area of research, offering clues into the motivations behind the strategic decisions and behaviors of CEOs. Further, in a disturbing trend, evidence demonstrates that the current generation of American university business students (i.e., Millennials) are significantly more narcissistic than previous generations (Bergman et al., 2010; Westerman et al., 2011), suggesting that this trend is accelerating and represents a potential challenge for future organizational performance. As discussed in more detail below, narcissism is a psychological state or personality disorder that is characterized by high self-regard and desire for personal aggrandizement. Thus, project champions who are narcissists could have the potential of severely affecting projects on a number of levels, from selection of viable options to pursue, to the manner in which they are controlled and their ongoing status assessed. In this paper, we conceptually examine the nature of narcissism and link its behaviors directly to the duties and responsibilities of project champions. This linkage allows us to address the two questions mentioned above and to formulate several research propositions based on expected effects of narcissism on champion behaviors. The degree to which narcissism in project champions has a clear impact on the success or failure of a project remains open to debate. Rather, our intention is to highlight the potential

impact of such a behavior on project management. In addition, we offer some observations and suggestions on challenges and research methodologies for pursuing the study of narcissistic champions in organizational settings. These discussions, including propositions, provide a foundation for future research. For practitioners, our propositions could lead to a better awareness and the development of an appropriate set of actions to address the impact of narcissistic champions on project management.

Our approach is predicated on adopting an emic perspective in attempting to understand the values and impact on operating culture from the point of view of a “cultural insider;” in this case, the narcissistic project champion (Jones et al, 2004). The role played by this key organizational member as project sponsor can inform on both the dynamics of cause and ultimately, effect, as we examine the implications of narcissistic behavior (Creswell, 1998). That is, narcissistic behavior serves as a motivating force in impelling key organizational personnel (in our case, the champion) that leads to a variety of actions supporting project development. Whether these actions are fundamentally detrimental to the project must also be considered from ultimate effect; that is, were the narcissist’s actions designed to benefit themselves, their championed projects, or the joint linking of project to champion? The degree to which we can begin to understand the impact of narcissism on project sponsorship allows for a more nuanced sensemaking of organizational behavior and the implementation of projects (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

The next section presents the literature on project sponsorship and narcissism as theoretical background. Next, research propositions are presented, followed by the discussion on the relationship between the behavior of narcissistic champions and project performance. The last section of the paper presents the potential challenges and methodologies for research on narcissism and championing behavior, including additional potential research topics.

2. Background

2.1. Project championing

Project championing has long been recognized as an important element in successful project implementation. Some of the earliest work on the championing idea derives from Schon (1963), Chakrabarti (1974) and Maidique (1980). Donald Schon (1963), in fact, first coined the term “champion” and examined its role in technological innovation. Although primarily theoretical treatments, these authors first identified the importance of the sponsorship role as a means for improving the prospects for innovative organizational behavior. In the project management field, “project champions” were introduced by Morton (1983) and Pinto and Slevin (1988) and distinguished from the project manager as a separate, but equally critical actor in improving the likelihood of project success. From a role perspective, champions can be members of top management, using their influence to support a project through streamlining gated reviews or securing necessary initial or incremental funding. They can be the project managers themselves, as in the case where authority to run a project is given to the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/276679>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/276679>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)