

# Pipeline

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[www.pipelinepub.com](http://www.pipelinepub.com) Volume 5, Issue 7

## How did that PM get to be in charge?

by Peter Gilligan

There are a thousand reasons why projects fail. And people have written thousands of articles trying to explain why projects fail, quite a few of them fingering the project manager in charge. That's not exactly unfair, because we put Project Managers in charge expressly to achieve success, and poor project management plays its part in delivering failure instead. The PM's primary role is to shepherd their projects through the minefield of functional and technical challenges, budget constraints, demanding users, ridiculous deadlines, self-interested vendors and the other 994 dangers that need to be navigated. Not every PM is up to the task. I know I'm not the only person to have looked at a project and asked myself, "How did *that* PM get to be in charge?"



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I found myself asking that question again recently. My natural first reaction was to criticize the PM who was clearly out of his depth on several levels. This time, however, I found myself wondering, "Who on earth would assign this PM to this type of project? It quickly became clear when talking to the PM that he had not managed anything like this before and that he was going back to the textbook to try to work out how to run the project, which is obviously not a good approach when under time and budget constraints. I concluded that, fundamentally, the situation was not his fault. He never misrepresented his skills and experience, but

his manager assigned this project to him anyway. What was the process his manager used to make that decision and how much thought was applied? No process, not much thought. The thinking was likely along the lines of: "I have a project. You have a PM job title. You're available. This one's yours."

Could that PM have refused the assignment? Possibly, but with potential career-limiting consequences. Will that PM succeed? No, but he'll be a useful person to blame for the failure.

This happens too often. Senior management inability to select the right PM is just the first of a range of management failings that result in failed or dysfunctional projects. Add to the list PMs with accountability but no authority; team members selected from the ranks of those with nothing else to do, instead of those with something to contribute; absence of effective high-level oversight; inability of bosses to provide practical advice, support or help when a project is in trouble.

Who gets to assign PMs to projects? The answer to this may provide some insight into one of the root causes of the problem, at least in IT projects. Across business, not just in telecom, systems have become so pervasive that everyone has an interest in their success. At one time, IT departments ran the projects and assigned the managers. Too often, those project teams had no business domain knowledge, important decisions affecting business department were made without business input, and managers were often dismayed at the uncontrolled cost overruns and time slippages created by what they saw as bloated IT departments. Some business managers saw internal IT power and control games wasting energy and decided that relying on IT provided not much advantage to the company.



The frustration in the business departments became so great that they started to ignore their IT groups and go it alone. As a result we have business managers that are no doubt completely qualified in their sphere making decisions on systems and who should manage their technical implementation. These are smart people, but with no experience in IT management or deployment. This can have just as unhappy results as the previous situation. In fact, this is exactly how the unfortunate PM mentioned earlier ended up in his current no-win situation.

So how should these folks select the “right” PM? Is there a better way? Here are some of my perspectives on this as a long-time project manager, program manager, decision-maker, and even, now and again, a client.

First, check the fundamentals, the candidate PM’s skills, experience, qualifications etc. This should be an obvious step, but you may be surprised how often it is omitted. Now the candidates have been qualified against the basics how do you further minimize your project risk? Domain knowledge is a key consideration and preferably includes experience managing projects exactly like yours. Having *successfully* managed several similar projects is even better! Just because a person’s job title is “PM” does not mean they are qualified to manage any type of project.

This is a problem, particularly in the IT industry. There is a view that all IT project managers are the same. Not true. I would describe myself as a software development and software package implementation PM. Please do not assign me an IT infrastructure project, like an IT network design and deployment project. Don’t ask me to manage desktop setups and server deployments. Yes, these come under the umbrella of IT Projects, but they are not in my core skill set. Sure, I could quickly learn, but the project will probably take longer, cost more, and will no doubt experience problems along the way as I work out the best way to do things. An IT Infrastructure PM would do a better job.

If I have an issue with my heart I will get a better result by seeing a cardiologist rather than a podiatrist. Both are doctors but ... you get the point. Not all PM’s are equal: look for experience relevant to your project, the closer the fit the better.

What if you don’t have a PM that is a good fit or you want to develop and extend your current cadre of project managers? A PM has to get experience somewhere, so not every job can have an old hand. How do you manage the risk profile of that project that has been assigned to a relatively inexperienced manager? First, make sure the experience gap is not too big. “In at the deep end” works, but only sometimes, and some projects are too valuable to risk. But where the gap is crossable, the answer is skill mix. Take a team view and make sure the PM has selected strong resources to support him or her – and that those needed skilled resources are made available. The PM mentioned earlier in this article would have benefited from this approach. If he had the support of a few top caliber Business Analyst and Systems Analyst types who had delivered similar projects he could have leveraged their knowledge to build a solid plan. But that didn’t happen. His Program Manager held the purse strings and wouldn’t pay for the necessary skills. Ouch.

What if this project is entering uncharted territory? Optimism is a wonderful thing, but many people have been burned when they’re the first to adopt new technology. Entering unknown territory requires realistic estimating and budgeting; over-optimistic budgets and timelines can doom projects before they start. Expectations have power: when you put forward a project proposal with a defined budget and timeframe, project sponsors expect them to be met. Assign a PM who can plan, plan, plan. One who can carefully scrutinize vendor and developer

estimates, question everything and not accept unsubstantiated answers. Someone who checks the math several times, factors in risk and contingency and makes sure the sponsors understand the risk profile and potential impacts. Ensure he or she documents the risks and mitigates them. I have found that mitigation usually comes in the form of smart, experienced resources. Doing all this up front greatly improves the projects' prospects for success and can save you from those very uncomfortable "please explain" meetings.

Now you have selected the PM and made sure he/she has selected a great team, what next? Think about authority, as well as accountability. According to the textbooks, there is no point assigning accountability unless the PM also has the authority to deliver results. Theoretically therefore, project managers should have full control of their projects including budgets and resourcing. In reality, project managers are too often handed projects complete with budgets and teams defined, and told to go make it work! Bad idea. Without authority, a PM is relegated to being an administrator - resolving minor issues, tracking progress and reporting status to the real decision-makers who may still hold the PM accountable for failure, if not always for success.

So, the project is under way. Your job is done - right? You can put your feet up, skim every other status report and generally feel good about yourself. Sorry, that's not the way it works. Next to selecting the wrong PM, the next biggest mistake of management is assuming that if no one tells them there's a problem, then everything is OK. This is where experience and people skills are essential in a senior manager. People are often strange and unpredictable and need to be handled carefully to get the best from them. (Some may argue that project managers are stranger than most, but as a PM myself I see us as a noble and brave breed.) However PMs do vary in personality and style. There is no single recipe for successfully managing a project. Each PM has developed the style that works for them. The trick as a business or program manager is to identify and work with each style. Some PMs like and need more attention, while others might see that as intrusive. Be vigilant and inquisitive: look past the formal reports for changes in behavior that may point to problems on the project that have not yet surfaced. Some project managers will hold onto issues that should be escalated in the brave hope that they can resolve them, especially if the upward relationship is tense. Establishing a relationship that allows you and the PM to be comfortable is essential to the free flow of information and the teamwork required to bring projects home. Try to remain engaged, walking that fine line between involvement and interference. Deal promptly with the internal politics and organizational issues as soon as they arise, as these can distract a project manager from the attending to the real objectives of the project.

From the outset of a project, someone - a business manager or a program manager or some other senior manager in charge - makes a decision about project leadership. Assigning the right PM is a critical success factor, so the selection decision needs to be made intelligently, after diligent research. If circumstances force a less than perfect candidate into the role, the senior manager responsible must be prepared to provide the required level of active support. Business and program managers worth their money will support their choice by actively monitoring performance, providing practical assistance and advice, fixing problems

and removing roadblocks. As a last resort, they must be prepared to replace a PM to ensure successful delivery of a project.

Next time you find yourself thinking "How on earth did *that* PM get to be in charge?", please remember that project managers are assigned to projects. When a project led by an inexperienced PM is going badly, perhaps the right question to ask is: "How did that PM's boss get to be in charge?"

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