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The Adaptive Project Manager Skills Series

Successful Adaptive Project Managers continuously validate and revise their comprehension of stakeholder mindsets and their own mindsets as well.



The Mindset

Project management is a practice that begins and ends with the perception of the environment and goals affecting the initiative being worked on. That perception is formed by the set of assumptions, methods, or notions the project manager and influential stakeholders believe to be true: their mindsets.

It merits mentioning that no matter how close alignment appears to be between individuals or groups, no two mindsets are ever the same.

The ability to understand what mindsets are comprised of, how malleable or brittle they are, the context of their origins, and how they are distributed is a fundamental skill Adaptive Project Managers possess. Having this foundation enables the Adaptive Project Manager to understand the differences and similarities between and among mindsets. And with that understanding, potential knowledge of the impact those mindsets could or will have on the outcome of the project. However, this is not a “one and done” activity.

Developing an accurate picture of stakeholder mindsets is an ongoing process and especially critical in the context of change. The key word here is accurate. Successful Adaptive Project Managers continuously validate and revise their comprehension of stakeholder mindsets and their own mindsets as well. The converse is also true: failing to review or revise mindsets with sufficient regularity will result in inaccurate assessments, which if acted upon, could have severe consequences.

Adaptive project managers know that their mission is to mobilise people to deliver successful outcomes. This can only be achieved with a firm recognition that stakeholder mindsets are what really drive or impede progress.

Working iteratively

It's hard to argue that humankind's progress is not the direct result of continuous iterative activity. "Iteration" when used as a verb means the act of repeating, like flipping through social media posts. When used as a noun, it means version, as in the latest iteration of a software application. The Adaptive Project Manager (APM) recognises the importance of both definitions.

One of the basic foundational aspects of Adaptive Leadership is the notion of experimentation. Experimenting is an extension of the biologic model for evolution. In biology, "experiments" are conducted each time reproduction occurs. Those elements, in this case DNA, that support the organisms survival or ability to thrive, are carried forward. Those that don't are discarded. This is iteration at its most extreme.

Further, the biology analogy has a heavy dependence on diversity. The "modifications" nature creates with each iteration result in diverse sets of alternative experiments. The best parts of those alternatives survive. The not so good pieces are changed or left behind. Think about the variety and diversity of plant life and how it got that way.

The last piece in the biology comparison is time. As a general rule, nature takes a very, very long time to settle in on something that works. There are exceptions. For "simple" organisms like viruses, mutations (modifications) happen very rapidly. A general rule is that the more complex an organism is, the more time it needs to create diverse iterations of itself in order to thrive.

Adaptive leaders know that optimum solutions are rarely arrived at on the first try. They know that diversity, in this case diversity of thought or expertise, is critical in the search for what's best.

They also know that to create an experiment, carry it out, see what worked and what didn't, discard the non-working parts, add new parts to try and then repeat the process, takes time. And they know the bigger and more complex the problem, that more time and more iterations are often needed to reach the goal.

There are additional context-sensitive nuances with respect to iteration form, cadence, duration and timing, but working iteratively as a guiding concept is something every Adaptive Project Manager can use to improve outcomes.



The old adage "practice makes perfect" infers that if you repeat something enough times, noting the things that went right and correcting the things that went wrong, you will eventually land on the optimum solution. If you have ever learned to play a musical instrument or master a sport, you're familiar with this form of iteration.

For the Adaptive Project Manager, this is a continuing process, with each project serving as a single iteration. The critical activity is diagnosing and understanding the good and the bad (which will happen on multiple dimensions and at different times during the arc of a project), and then taking steps to improve. The secret to mastering this technique is to keep a contemporaneous record of observations and then, using those observations, formulate a strategy for the next project; what to keep, what to change, what to discard.

Another iteration technique familiar to all project managers is the standing meeting. Not to be confused with a "stand-up" meeting where everyone is literally standing, standing meetings are probably the most prevalent form of iteration used in organisational management. And frequently they are also the most abused and ineffective form of iteration. Useless or unnecessary meetings (frequently of the standing variety) always top the list of things that annoy people and degrade performance.

In today's world, Adaptive Project Managers proactively use standing meetings to accomplish two primary goals: 1) to provide individual stakeholders pre-determined and consistent times for providing feedback or asking questions in a private and safe setting, and 2) to elicit collective intelligence and feedback in group environments where a pre-set cadence is in place and input from all participants is germane; think Sprint Reviews under a Scrum development method.

Iteration is a powerful tool if used purposely. Adaptive Project Managers think deeply about the benefits and consequences iterative behaviour can bring to their projects, to their work and their personal lives.

How to work politically

The word politics has negative connotations for most people. It conjures up scenes of backstabbing, double-dealing, entrenched positions and just generally duplicitous behaviour. But working “politically” doesn’t have to include any of those things. In fact, learning how to recognise and deal with political situations can often be your best tool for getting things done while at the same time advancing your career.

Let’s start by defining what it means to work politically.

Working politically means understanding three things:

1. Motivation
2. Interconnection
3. Communication

Motivation

Discovering what motivates people or groups lies at the heart of working politically. Those motivations are what people use, not just to form their positions, but as touchstones (conscious or subconscious) when it comes to making decisions. Knowing what motivates someone can allow you to develop solutions that will be met with enthusiasm. Ignoring motivations can result in an outright rejection of any idea or ask, regardless of its validity or benefit.

Many opportunities present themselves to determine motivation. Conscious observation of behaviour is perhaps the easiest; direct inquiry the most complicated. Regardless of the method, great care should be taken to validate any conclusions before any action based on those conclusions is taken.

Interconnection

Decisions and actions in work settings rarely affect single individuals. So how people are interconnected is very important. Through the lens of motivation, people’s connections can influence their responses in ways that may not be immediately apparent.

How motivation manifests itself through interconnections can often be observed when initially looking for motivation itself. Watch behaviour in meetings and note how it changes depending on the participants.

Communication

Finally, how and when things are communicated when trying to act politically can often mean the difference between success and failure. Here, communication styles of both the transmitter (you) and the receiver (them) must be factored in when trying to make a point or persuade the other party. And don’t forget about timing. Mistimed communication can easily derail the best of intentions.

Frustration quickly occurs when two people with different communication styles are put in a situation where they must reach a unanimous decision, regardless of how aligned their motivations are. It is incumbent on you to determine what communication style and approach will yield the result you are after and adapt accordingly. If you think your communication style doesn’t need to change depending on your audience and message, you will never be successful at working politically.



Conclusion

For the Adaptive Project Manager, working politically means actively and continuously thinking about who you are interacting with. Taking their motivations and connections into consideration when you communicate with them will dramatically increase your chances of a successful interaction. And regardless of how small or seemingly innocuous, establishing common ground or interests always increases your chances for success.

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