



# It's those pesky people who make it work

Turnaround managers are a diverse group coming in all shapes and sizes. The common denominator is their background of knowledge and education, formal or not, is usually technical in nature. Many have degrees in mechanical engineering, construction management, metallurgy, chemical engineering and etcetera — all left-brain functions.

“PMBOK,” the definitive guide to project management, states project management is the “application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements and is accomplished through the application and integration of the project management processes of initiating, planning, executing, monitoring, controlling and closing” a project.

I don't think that fully defines the essence of project management because it doesn't address the peskiest part — people. Many of us think the work is not only rewarding but would be fun, and thus easy, if it were not for having to deal with people. The late Peter Drucker said in his book, “Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices,”

“Management is a practice rather than a science — managers practice management. It is comparable to medicine, law and engineering. It is not knowledge, but performance. Lawyers practice law, doctors practice medicine and managers practice management. Project management is not just the mechanics of applying knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities — it is all those plus the practice of management.”

If that is so, project management then is not just structure, tools and mechanics. Mechanics are easy to learn. The intricacy of working with people is not so easy.

Like other middle managers, turnaround managers have a unique organizational position. They must interface with four factions of varying, and sometimes conflicting, needs including their subordinates, outside stakeholders, management peers and superiors. Management requires more right-brain function than left.

We are often promoted because we excelled at our technical job. The next step up was as turnaround manager, which was masquerading as a left-brain job. Today's

practice is for turnaround/project managers to have a great deal of responsibility and very little authority. Therefore, the only way we can make things happen is by working through and with other people. So we spend all of our time cajoling, counseling, motivating, negotiating, persuading, selling, leading, influencing or just plain begging people to take the right action, at the right time and for the right reasons.

The foundational component for project management is human systems and practices, like begging, which is an art and a right-brain function. Then there are the egos and politics of the four interfaces. If that is not enough, every organization has a cultural persuasion based on their common values, traditions and beliefs. Oddly, these traditions may be the least obvious yet are the most stoutly defended.

Why do some coaches have winning teams while others do not? All NFL coaches know the fundamentals of blocking and tackling just as well as the legendary Vince Lombardi did. The difference was Lombardi knew how to connect with and motivate his people.

In turnarounds, conflicts come in two varieties, the technical (blocking and tackling) and human (working together for the common good). There are generally accepted specifications, standards, rules and playbooks to guide us through the technical stuff. But because people and organizations are diverse, successfully navigating the people issues while enlisting cooperation and collaboration is less clear-cut and requires a different set of skills to be effective.

I am a big proponent of playbooks and tools. It just makes our life easier and gives us more time to focus on people and the practices of management. I've been around long enough to identify patterns and to realize consistent success in managing turnarounds or any project comes when technical competence is combined with effective management of people. We must remember it is not the tools and processes that do projects — it's those pesky people.

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