

# Improving Your Abilities

Perhaps you've read the recommended books and even attended the recommended seminars. This does not mean you are ready to lead a project or that your company will select you to lead any project other than projects requiring basic knowledge. You need experience.

## Gaining Experience

If you were a high-wire walker in a circus, you would probably think it a good idea to gain your initial experience with a safety net you can fall into. Because of the importance of a project to a company, it is an equally good idea to have a "safety net." I recommend that you gain your initial project management experience under the tutelage of an experienced project manager, so that if you stumble, the impact to the project and to you will be minimized. As time goes on, however, you will gain more experience by taking on more responsibility and performing at a higher level.

### *Initial Experience*

Initial experience will be gained by you as an associate or assistant project manager. It should be gained in some position that has a "safety net" to fall back on when you are confronted with a difficult situation. Only after you have gained initial experience, under supervised conditions, should you lead a project on your own.

You will gain experience from each and every assignment. But it is your task to ensure that the experience is positive and worthwhile. I remember that an associate once tried to justify the higher salary of a communications technician by saying: "He has twenty years' experience as a comm tech." My position was that he really has four years' experience, five times over. One can learn all he needs to know about

this particular position in four years. After four years, he is welcome to stay in the same position if he wants to, but I'm not paying for it! What should that little quip mean to you? It should mean to keep your career onward and upward. Experience is a great thing, but it must be progressive experience.

### ***Continuing Experience***

Gain your experience at each level under the recommended conditions. For instance, the early levels recommend that you be an assistant or associate or at least under the tutelage of a senior project manager. Doing so is to your advantage. You get to pile up experience at a level but with a “backup” to go to if things start to sour. Even if everything is running smoothly, you get the opportunity to observe another project manager in action. Believe me, that's worth a lot.

As you read through the five levels you found that a period of experience was recommended for each level. These periods have been determined by research and personal experience. They assume you have achieved the knowledge requirements early in the period and that the experience was applying this knowledge. This requirement may or may not be what your employer or potential employer requires. Of course, the employer's requirement must take precedence. The idea presented in the experience requirements is to understand and apply your knowledge base at each level and ensure good (better yet, outstanding) performance. Then, don't dwell at that level. Move on to the next level.

You really want to look upon the experience recommendations as an advantage to you, not a disadvantage. Everyone gets excited and ready to jump on the next project, but from your standpoint as well as from the position of the company, you need to ensure that you are ready. You want your next position to be a challenge, not a struggle.

### **Developing Your Persona**

“Mirror, mirror on the wall. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Don't we all wish we had such insight? Unfortunately, we will need to review our persona more traditionally. Your persona is the sum of all the things that go into your makeup—it's who you are. It's your personality, your attitude, your method of doing things, and how others perceive you.

Again, there are intrinsic factors and extrinsic factors. In this case, the intrinsic factors include your natural inclinations and attitude. Are you a “things” person or a “people” person? Are you the “steely-eyed

captain of the ship” or the “happy-go-lucky co-pilot” who takes it as it comes? You can change your natural inclinations and attitude, but not much.

Now, the extrinsic factors. These include your education, your training, and your experiences. Additionally, the impact your peers have on your thinking is tremendous. Extrinsic factors can be changed a lot. Every time you take a course or a seminar, you view things a little differently as a result of what you learned. But here too is where they come together. For instance, the experiences you bring into a seminar modulate what you take away from the seminar and what you will bring with you to the next seminar. Will the project manager sitting next to you take away exactly the same understanding? I don’t think so. It is the sum of these intrinsic and extrinsic factors that makes you unique.

Whenever I think of persona, I think of a little story one of my graduate advisers used to tell. He said that every day at five o’clock the subways were filled with people heading to night classes to get their MBAs or some other degree. They were convinced that those degrees would make all the difference and that they would then be on their way to success. His position was that it may make a difference in some cases, but the problems the majority of them had were personality problems. That’s what was holding them back. His position certainly backs up the old saw that says: “The very strengths that got you here are the same ones that are keeping you from going any further.”

### ***Assessing Your Persona***

Take a look at your persona, both the intrinsic factors and the extrinsic factors, and find out what you think of yourself and what others think of you as well. If you don’t care, now is a good time to stop reading! There are a number of ways to determine your personal and leadership characteristics. One of the best I know is: *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*, an idea that was developed by Peter B. Myers and Katherine Briggs and made into a seminar. Instructors certified by Consulting Psychologists teach the seminar and evaluate the summary results.

The idea behind this course is that people have a primary style of operating that is expressed in four-letter factors that are parts of four pairs of factors. The factors are: Extroverted (E) versus introverted (I); sensing (S) versus intuition (N); thinking (T) versus feeling (F); and judging (J) versus perceiving (P). There are sixteen combinations, each reflecting a different personality type. The MBTI tends to reflect your

intrinsic factors. As I said before, you can change these factors but not much. Over time, I have watched my MBTI go from I-N-T-J (INTJ) to E-S/N-T-J to E/I-S/N-T-J back to basically I-N-T-J. The shared characters (that is, E/I) are the result of scores being exactly the same in the two factors. My changes were due, in large part, to the positions I held at a particular moment in time. It seems to be sort of an application of *Situational Leadership* (SL)—you do what you have to do when you have to do it!

MBTI has been around a long time and has become the de facto personality test in industry. I believe in it so strongly that I had my son take the test, at my own expense, while he was still a freshman in college. I use MBTI, presented and evaluated by certified instructors, in all my team seminars.

## Improving Your Abilities

As I said at the outset, leadership is the most important attribute of a project manager. There are dozens of leadership courses available as seminars and training courses and dozens of books on the subject as well. One of the best initial evaluation courses I have come across is *Leadership Practices Inventory* (LPI). LPI is a test instrument designed to show your leadership practices. The LPI was created by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. It is a self- or local assessment tool that is clever in its construction. A self-assessment questionnaire is filled in by the leader (you). It is further filled in by up to ten peers, supervisors, and subordinates. Include as many different categories as possible. When the results are returned, they are transferred to a matrix sheet and evaluated. The matrix sheet decodes the questions, resulting in scores that evaluate your Challenging, Inspiring, Enabling, Modeling, and Encouraging leadership practices. It's a bit more involved than this but you get the idea.

I recommend that LPI be followed up by *Situational Leadership* (SL). SL is a seminar created by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. It is taught by certified university associate instructors. The basis of the course is that different situations call for different leadership styles. They call the styles they teach: Delegating, Participating, Selling, and Telling. Which style you use depends how the task is delivered and the relationship between the leader and the followers. One style just won't work for all situations. This course has been around for a long time, and it is one of the best leadership courses I have seen.

I think you will find the relationship between the leadership styles of *Situational Leadership* (delegating, participating, and so on) similar to the people-to-people styles of *I'M OK, You're OK* (parent-to-child, adult-to-adult, and so on).

The group courses are best set up by the training department of your company, so that the “language” that is a part of each of these courses is common to all project managers and to other leaders in your company. This way, when someone says: “Oh, I know him, he’s an INTJ,” everyone will know what the speaker is talking about.

### **Suggested Seminars**

*Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*

Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc.

3803 E. Bayshore Road

Palo Alto, CA 94303

Phone: 800 624-1765

Web site: [www.mbti.com](http://www.mbti.com)

*Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)*

Instruction package available to training departments.

Pfeiffer & Company

8517 Production Avenue

San Diego, CA 92121

Phone: 619 578-5900

Fax: 619 578-2042

Web site: <http://www.pfeiffer.com/>

E-mail: [customer care@Pfeiffer.com](mailto:customer care@Pfeiffer.com)

*Situational Leadership*

The Center for Leadership Studies

230 West Third Avenue

Escondido, CA 92025-4180

Phone: 800 330-2840 or 760 741-6595

Fax : 760 747-9384

Web site: <http://www.situational.com/#>

### **Suggested Reading**

Harris, Thomas. *I'm OK, You're OK*. New York: Avon, 1976.

## **Improving Your Performance**

Performance is the quality level at which your experience is exhibited. It is reasonable to say that experience is time-related and performance is quality-related. For your own personal benefit, it is best if your performance is acknowledged by some official act by your supervisor or the enterprise or corporation. Recognition such as a “Letter of Com-

mentation,” “Team Leader of the Month,” or “Project Manager of the Year” are the types I am talking about. Something concrete, objective, and portable! Without making a pest of yourself, try to get every major accomplishment recognized. Keep copies of each and every one of these awards and certificates.

### ***Review Your Performance***

The absolute worst reviewer of your performance is you! You will either be overly critical or will rationalize your performance. This is just human nature. (Perhaps I should have had this section titled “Have Your Performance Reviewed” rather than “Review Your Performance.”) Nevertheless, you need to constantly keep a finger on your own pulse. It is essential that you understand how you are perceived by your peers, by your team members, by your management, and by your customers. At every occurrence, ask yourself: “Is this pulse reading I am taking now a constant or just a single reading”? You will not be perceived by everyone in the same way all the time. What you are striving for is a “best fit,” a Root Mean Square (RMS) of all the evaluations of all the people in all the positions on all the projects you have interfaced with.

### ***Enhance Your Performance***

Once again, review the equation for project management success:

$$\text{Knowledge} + \text{Experience} + \text{Persona} \times \text{Performance} = \text{Success}$$

This means that you use all the knowledge you can gain as leverage, apply that knowledge to gain experience, and through your persona, show performance. This is the only path to project management success.

Back in Chapter 7, you went through an exercise of checking off and evaluating your abilities as they were required for each skill set. We are at a point now where you need to do the same thing for your performance. Unfortunately, I can’t give you a checklist this time. What I suggest you do is list each project or program you have led. Inside that listing, like an outline, list the objectives that you had for each project. Then grade your performance against each goal. It’s a good idea to have some of your associates work with you in remembering what the goals and objectives were. If you have not yet led a project, do the

same thing for projects you have participated in. At this point, the objective is to establish a methodology rather than worrying about specifics.

From now on, make your list at the beginning of each project you participate in or lead. Evaluate your performance, and ask your peers to help you both with making the list and with the evaluation. Now you have a technique that's worthwhile. It's something to which you can point with pride.

What we have done is to establish a set of objectives that you grade at the completion of each as they occur. After just a short while, this technique will make you goal-oriented. You will know your precise performance from day to day. A trick I have found to be helpful is to have these goals and performance evaluations in a visible place. You may want to put them on a white board or on the flyleaf of your notebook. You may want to list the goal for today or for this week on the whiteboard and keep the others in another place. Frequently, an interesting thing happens. People notice the technique and commend you for it. Some of them start using the same technique. Your boss notices the goals you have posted in a visible place and sees your progress. This is a pretty good idea, isn't it?

## Note

1. The evil queen questions her magic mirror in the Grimm brothers' fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.