

From Project Management to General Management **How to Avoid the Dreaded 'Career Trap'** **by Ed Naughton**



Thirty years ago Alvin Toffler predicted that project management would supplant traditional forms of steady state management as the rate of change accelerated and the turbulence of the managerial environment increased. His prediction is well on the way to fulfilment. The 21st century manager will need to be skilful at managing amid the turbulence created by rapid change.

How many technically oriented people do you know who believe that they are in a career trap? They complain that all the important decisions are made by administrators and accountants. A realisation has hit them that while they have pursued a technical orientation in their organisation, they are unable to jump out of this particular box. Their career path is stymied - they cannot span across the organisation structure to lead other functions such as marketing, human resources or finance. They cannot aspire to becoming Chief Executive- untapped potential remains underutilised.

If such individuals wish to satisfy ambitions with wider horizons, they will have to make the transition to management - a multidisciplinary activity. A large number of are successfully managing at the highest level. However, for every one of these, there are many trapped in their specialisation. Why so?

The transition to management can be difficult. The path is not an easy one - the primary bias is towards technical issues - solving technical problems. Inputs to and understanding of the employee organisation's strategy is often tenuous at best. People-management skills such as communications, leadership, motivation team building etc., are often acquired on an ad-hoc basis.

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Managing is about planning, organising, directing and controlling. Successful professional managers must:

- Set the vision to guide and grow the organisation (strategy)
- Set out how the goals and objectives are to be executed (methodology)
- Get the people to actually deliver (people-management)
- In the construction and facilities management sectors, education is geared more towards Methodology than Strategy or People-management.

The technical oriented professions will benefit if more of their individuals can emerge from their specialisation into positions of greater power and influence in management, administration and politics. How can this shift be achieved?

Project Management offers an interesting route. "While ordinary management is about improving the status quo, project management is about making things happen - managing change".

It is a suitable channel because of the creative bent of many "techies" and their orientation towards practical achievement. However, contemplating such a conversion will mean having to enhance and bolt-on strategic and people-management skill. Remember, it is the project manager who manages the sensitive interfaces between the project and its political, social, business and technological environment.

Some 300 American project managers were asked for their opinion on what skills were necessary to successfully manage projects. Eighty-four percent said, "being a good communicator". Other high rating skills were organisation, team building, leadership and coping or stress management. These skills were all rated more highly than knowledge or experience of the project's technology and, by implication, more highly than any of the other professional skills involved such as engineering or finance. The first step on the career path beyond the technical route is the acquisition of those skills.

To sum up, there are there good reasons for this audience to acquire skills in project management.

1. Project management is an accessible escape route from the technical potential career trap.
2. Those skills open the door to project management opportunities.
3. They will be necessary for general management in a chaotic future