

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES FROM THE TOP

An Interview with – Edward Hoffman, Chairman, PMI Global Corporate Council

This is the first in an ongoing series of interviews with business executives, government officials, academics, and project managers to be published in the PMI NAC Newsletter. Our goal here is to present leading ideas and insights on the practice of project management for our readers.

Edward Hoffman, Director of the NASA Academy for Program / Project & Engineering Leadership (APPEL), and Chairman of the PMI Global Corporate Council (GCC), discusses his thoughts about contemporary project management challenges. He also shares some of the goals he has identified for the GCC as he prepared for its semi-annual meeting to be held in Houston, November 6-8, 2007.

The GCC is a worldwide group of more than 20 leading companies and government agencies that works with PMI to raise international project management capabilities and standards. These predominantly multinational companies represent more than two million employees in 190 countries – within 13 major industries. GCC membership is by invitation only and limited to executive-level participants.

More information on the GCC is available at:

<http://www.pmi.org/BusinessSolutions/Pages/Global-Corporate-Council.aspx>



The NASA Academy of Program/Project & Engineering Leadership (APPEL) provides leadership, advice, direction, and support for the development and learning of the NASA program/project management and the NASA engineering community.

Edward Hoffman

PMI NAC: What was it about the PMI Global Corporate Council and its vision and goals that persuaded you to accept the position as GCC Chairman?

Hoffman: At NASA – whatever we do – large or small – is accomplished through a project or program. In space flight, aeronautics, and our other endeavors – mission success depends on us having a successful project.

Thus, accepting this opportunity to lead the PMI Global Corporate Council was a natural for me and for NASA. PMI is central to superior project management. And NASA must have the very best project management has to offer. The GCC is a direct pathway to the future of project management. Today, the need for superb project management is pervasive and growing.

In fact, I would assert that today all complex work is project-based. And that's simply because complexity invariably has a very high cost associated with it. If you cannot quickly determine how to manage the cost of complexity – you'll be out of business – anywhere in the world.

In my daily work, I run across executives and managers who tell me what they need to do will not require a project-management solution. To test that assertion, I usually ask them five simple questions: (1) Does your activity involve people? (2) Is there a dollar cost or budget associated with what you must do? (3) Does your task or objective have a schedule to meet? (4) Are you on the hook to meet specific quality and performance requirements? (5) Does your work impact others in a major or minor way? Or, does it potentially impact our global environment?

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If the answer is yes to any one of these questions, then typically you must answer all of them to satisfy your task requirements. Therefore, you have a project or a portfolio of projects to manage. Project management concepts, processes, and techniques will play a role in the outcome of your work.

The GCC includes more than a score of multinational contractors including Accenture, BAE Systems, Bank of America, and Boeing to name just a few. Today, we are fortunate that many business leaders and organizations know the success of their enterprises will be won or lost in an increasingly “projectized world.” Thus, it is now critical to find new ways to exchange our knowledge and experience – and improve the methods and tools we use to manage our projects and supporting processes.

GCC is a forum on project management. The GCC organization is not a traditional trade group. It includes some leading firms that are relatively new to the project management practices and standards we seek to promote. Other GCC members have a great deal of experience and they are participating as a part of their commitment to lead the way and take the next step in the world of project management.

I like to characterize the GCC as a “camp fire” of sorts. We gather up senior leaders from major enterprises to grapple with issues the world is facing today. Going a step further – I like to think back to what life was like thousands of years ago during our shared Neolithic heritage. In these ancient times, fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, and extended families – sat at campfires the world over – sharing ideas, experiences, visions, and dreams. American Idol was nowhere to be seen. Art was strictly do-it-yourself as anyone who has visited Lascaux, France can attest.

Instead, these people had virtually no choice but to live, work, learn, and communicate about the pressing things that mattered most in their lives; that is, how to survive on the next day and organize a group to go out and hunt down a woolly mammoth or great bear.

Back then, it might have taken an evening around the fire for a tribal elder or a parent to share everything they knew in the world about hunting, fishing, or making weapons.

Today, our interpersonal communication tools are the same. But now we talk about going to the moon, exploring Mars and our solar system – and saving the environment.

PMI NAC: *What do you see as the most important or challenging activities of the GCC?*

Hoffman: Key GCC challenges include (1) addressing what it means to us now that all work is project work and (2) what I call “Talent Management.” That is, finding and recruiting successful Project Managers is not enough anymore. The supply of top-quality project managers simply cannot keep up with worldwide demand for these skills. It is an increasingly critical issue for society.

We must clearly understand the issues and find ways to encourage more of our students and young people to acquire competencies, education, and experience to do project management work in all of its forms.

Our “simple” challenge is to manage talent and develop it. Related to this is specialized subject matter expertise and knowledge. It is increasingly important to successful projects. Tools such as the Internet and accelerating technology all play back into this set of issues.

Some of the challenges the NASA Constellation mission has include how do we get safer vehicles that will take us to the moon? What advances in health-care technology and space systems are needed for our astronauts to go to Mars? Technologies we’re solving for today often don’t exist yet – but these requirements also end up on the project critical path.

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Likewise, new models of organization and process management are required to achieve these goals and objectives. To do this we must identify the right knowledge and skill sets, and then be able to learn from that development process and reuse and apply it in new situations with the goal of solving even more challenging problems.

These functions and results – all pivot on an increasingly effective and efficient project management body of knowledge.

Another key challenge – (3) improve our abilities to select and develop more effective teams to manage and staff our projects. Despite all the advances in organizational theory in the previous century, establishing the right team with the right skills, cohesiveness, goal-seeking behavior and ability to quickly get down to business – is the most formidable challenge for the project manager – on each and every project.

Project success depends on the team assigned to plan and execute the project. We want to push our science and knowledgebase to help assure we're getting these critical factors right. Once we have the right team is it all downhill? Of course not. From there, we need to keep getting smarter on how we nourish and mature these teams more effectively and efficiently.

PMI NAC: How will NASA and other federal agencies benefit by participating in the GCC?

Hoffman: High-value items in the analysis include (1) developing project-centric organizational models, (2) identifying and preparing leaders and executives to think more effectively about how to leverage project-based work and outcomes, and (3) exchanging specific domain knowledge; and sharing and growing our information, experience, and lessons learned with our colleagues.

This relates to what I said about the campfire. I'm a big believer in the "power of stories."

That is, what we learn from each other and apply in our work every day must pass through a filter in our heads that separates background noise from what we believe is important. "Stories" told by colleagues we respect, admire, and work with – have special value for most of us. But a relevant, insightful story told by a complete stranger – can still penetrate the clutter in our daily lives and provides lessons and information in ways that are memorable and unique.

What's more, you might remember a story and the point that was made – 40 years after you forgot the name of the storyteller. That's power.

PMI NAC: What work products and results do you expect to see from the efforts of the GCC and its members?

Hoffman: Remember that the first term in the GCC name is "PMI." From my perspective, the council will be looking and listening carefully to the ideas and insights PMI wants to share with us. We want to ensure there is a robust dialog with our PMI partners at every step on our shared path. What does PMI see as key challenges in this discipline? What strategies does PMI want to develop and deploy to support this process? We'll add all this to our plans as we go forward working together.

Part of our task is to develop a charter with GCC members that gets down to basics. We'll articulate points such as "Why are we here?" It's clear why NASA is here – but we need answers to that question from each member of the group.

We also want to develop a sense of the measures for the outcomes we're working toward as a community. What to establish to measure our programs and progress. And, we will have social outcomes. The members of the GCC are the "thought leaders" from each firm or agency they represent.

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To get the most return on our invested time and effort, we will establish a network to exchange best practices with each other.

We will identify the challenges facing project-based organizations and we'll start working that collaboratively. We will manage all of our activities as projects in a portfolio of projects with the leaders of these companies and organizations.

PMI NAC: *What outcomes are you seeking at your Houston Conference November 6-8?*

Hoffman: It is important to set up our "strategy chain" or hierarchy with the senior leaders at GCC. That is, we will identify the series of interlocking strategies that are integral to achieving our goals. This is a major shortcoming for many organizations in government and industry.

The public understands that time is money. To be responsive, government needs to develop a project-based "mindset" and transition away from its functional management methodology. The project management methods require more focus on cost, schedule, requirements, and results. Too many government executives still see project management as a lower-level set of tools or procedures. We're changing the way government and industry looks at project management and working to differentiate more clearly what work is appropriate in a steady-state operational environment and what is more appropriate to be solved using project models and processes.

Our goal is to establish communications and training so executives in all disciplines will gain sufficient understanding of project management to nurture emerging project-based cultures in their own organizations. We want to structure that dialog by asking the right questions across our diverse project-based team in Houston.

PMI NAC: *What experiences or factors led you to get involved with PMI in the first place?*

Hoffman: My first experience with PMI was at the Boston PMI conference in 1997. I knew then what I know today – I'm passionate about project management and everything it entails. For me, the great thing about PMI is that it is an organic, evolving, learning community of committed people and volunteers that comes together to discuss the key issues.

That's a big part of what drew me into PMI. There is an opportunity to network with some very bright people. It is remarkable PMI has so many members with advanced degrees in technical, social, and creative disciplines.

PMI provides tremendous value as a forum for diverse groups of managers and executives to discuss advances in managerial decision-making, project management standards, and best practices as well as setting baselines for educational and professional achievement.

PMI NAC: *What do you see as the key challenges facing the project management profession / members of the GCC over the next 3-5 years?*

Hoffman: We've talked about a number of challenges in our discussion today. To sum up – three things are crucial over the next three to five years.

First – was what I called Talent Management. We face a chronic shortage of project managers in many countries around the world. That is a fact of life that is not going away. To move the needle here requires a concentrated effort over time.

Second, many challenges identified in our discussion can be simplified to how good we are at working together. The preferred route to success in this activity is to emphasize that with PMI, there are clearly defined project management "rules of the road" that constitute universal best practices based on standards and proven techniques for working together.

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Another aspect of how well we work together in today's multinational, multicultural business environment requires that we reach agreements in terms of knowledge-sharing and social aspects of project teams. In my experience, this worries many senior leaders across every industry and government agency.

And third, the most important message we must communicate to business and government is that project management is more than a method or a certification process for a certain class of practitioners. While we are making progress on changing this perception – we can't sit back and conclude it's obvious to everyone. The business world is moving there by degrees. Success on this front requires an ongoing effort from all us.