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The Collaborative Project Owner in Theory and Practice. Examples from Project Half Double

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Abstract

Top management support and the involvement of project owners in projects has been high on the agenda for a long time. Research suggests that this is more critical for project success than any other success factor. Studies show that the relationship between project owner and project manager is complex characterized by information asymmetry and potential mistrust. Studies also show that top managers may actually be reluctant to play an active role during the project life cycle. In this paper, we examine how the involvement of project owners unfolds in the project process, when given explicit attention in six projects in six different companies. We use data from Project Half Double, which is a Danish project management initiative intended at enhancing performance in projects. The paper shows that three of the organizations seem to develop efficient collaboration between project owner and project, while three other projects struggle to make this happen due to the project owners' lack of time and focus.

Keywords: Project owner; Top management support; Project governance

Introduction

Top management involvement is necessary for project and portfolio performance. In fact, research suggests that it is more critical for project success than any other success factor (Young & Poon, 2013). Top management involvement is defined as “devoting time to the [project] in proportion to its cost and potential, reviewing plans, following up on results and facilitating the management problems involved with integrating [project management] with the management process of the business” (Hermano & Martin-Cruz 2016, p. 715). Top management includes the project owner, who typically finances the project and has the authority and responsibility to ensure a successful project result (Karlsen, 2010). Consequently, good results are best achieved, when the collaboration between the project manager and the project owner is fruitful (Turner & Müller, 2004). However, this is not always the case.

Management executives have busy schedules and tend to be pressed for time. Research also shows that the relationship between project owner and project manager is complex characterized by information asymmetry and potential mistrust (Turner & Müller, 2004) and that top managers may actually be reluctant to play an active role in projects since they regard them as operational concerns rather than strategic tools (Hermano & Martín-Cruz, 2016). Besides, even though top management involvement is described as inherently good, overdoing it may be dysfunctional and lead to project failure (Young & Jordan, 2008).

Project Half Double (PHD) is a Danish project management initiative intended at enhancing performance in projects, experimenting with methods in real-world projects (Svejvig et al., 2016). PHD explicitly emphasizes the necessity of engaging the project owner as an active and committed participant. This means that project managers employing the Half Double methodology are aware of the importance of initiating this collaborative relationship. In this paper, we examine how the involvement of project owners in the project process unfolds in six projects in six different companies, when given special attention. With examples from PHD, we highlight its vision of the collaborative project owner in theory as well as how and why this ideal is challenged in practice.

The Half Double vision of the collaborative project owner

Half Double is a project management methodology intended to enhance performance in project organizations. It aspires to reform project leadership in ways of less bureaucracy, less formal steering committee meetings and less contractual focus (Svejvig, et al., 2016). A core element of this methodology is the emphasis on “an active ownership approach”. As responsible for establishing the project and securing its value creation and impact, the project owner should be actively engaged and committed. He or she has to allocate sufficient time to support the project manager and the projects sponsored. Consequently, the project owner must work in close collaboration with the project manager and the steering committee to ensure success. The project owner should remove organizational obstacles and invest time with the project – three hours biweekly as a rule of thumb – to ask questions, challenge decisions and becomes an active and engaged partner in the project work all around. It is argued that taking part in meetings will ensure continuous focus on impact and guide the overall project to stakeholder satisfaction (Svejvig, et al., 2016). This means that the active project owner and the project manager complement each other and are supposed to work in close collaboration to develop an informal and trusting relationship (Svejvig & Grex, 2016). Still, how to accomplish this relationship is

unclear. In the following section, we discuss the active project ownership in six projects involved in PHD.

During a period of six months, the project managers of these six projects were coached by Half Double consultants. Therefore, the research methodology is engaged scholarship where we co-produce knowledge with practitioners and are engaged in intervention (Van de Ven, 2007). Overall, the research aim is to evaluate the impact of PHD and whether this project paradigm increases the success rate of projects. Yet, in this paper, we focus exclusively on the experience with and characteristics of project owner involvement. The empirical data stems from interviews with project managers in the six organizations, workshops with project managers and consultants as well as documents such as project presentations, and reports (Svejvig et al. 2017).

Project Half Double - Six stories of project ownership

We present six case study vignettes of projects applying the Half Double methodology, which involves an explicit focus on collaborative project ownership. Table 1 summarizes the experience of project ownership in the six cases as well as company and project characteristics:

Table 1 Summarizing project ownership

Company	Project Characteristics	Project Ownership
Grundfos	Engineering product development (new generation of pumps)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project owner generally lacking focus and time • Meeting with chairman of the board boosted effect and focus • A proxy project owner was assigned
Siemens Wind Power	Engineering product development (wind turbine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More project owner cooperation requested • Project owner participation in meetings created a constructive dialogue on impact
Lantmännen Unibake	Market and product development project (bread concept for stores)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project owner had to take on various roles in the project such as project participant • The project owner was very busy and although being involved, cooperation was not particularly smooth
Novo Nordisk	IT Project (Supply Chain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project owner gave the project team a strong feeling of importance and energy • The project owner understood the importance of participation and delegated responsibility to a subordinate • Focus on dialogue rather than control
GN Audio	E-commerce project (channels for online marketing and sales)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project owner was deeply involved from the beginning and the project enjoyed a high degree of attention • The project owner was responsible for communicating with the steering committee, and for aligning expectations with senior managers

Company	Project Characteristics	Project Ownership
VELUX	Organizational change project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project owner participated in project meetings every week • The project owner was informed about the status and progress of the project, but was also involved in discussing immediate challenges • The project owner would talk to people in the organization to pave the way for the project

Grundfos – Delegating attention and responsibility: Due to the emphasis of top management support in PHD, the project manager invited the steering committee members to participate in sprint reviews. Attendance was often cancelled due to other priorities (Svejvig, et al., 2016). Instead a meeting with the chairman of Grundfos was scheduled. He was introduced to the technical elements of the project and gave feedback on the solution. The meeting turned out to impact the focus and collaboration of the team members positively (Svejvig, et al., 2016). Even though the project was designed with a fixed meeting pattern to enable the project owner’s active participation and to ease interaction between the project owner and the project team, the initial project owner’s attention was still difficult to realize. Instead, a representative for the owner was assigned to join the meetings.

Siemens Wind Power – new dialogue on impact: As part of PHD, the project manager at Siemens Wind Power worked towards re-boosting team meetings with a new agenda and set-up as well as the involvement of the project owner. However, making the project owner participate in these meetings proved a challenge. Yet, when he actually did join these meetings, he had an important bearing. The project owner was able to see for himself the posters with key focus points and visual plans on the project room walls. He challenged the project team’s priorities and strong focus on technical matters and directed the discussion toward the business impact that the project was initially set out to realize. Consequently, he helped create new insight and awareness regarding the importance of commercial deliverables and the potential risks of continuing the current product-oriented practice. At the end of the meeting, priorities had been updated to accelerate commercial deliverables, which might otherwise have been postponed. In that way, the project owner was able to create a new discourse on project impact and create awareness of the necessity of bridging technology and business sections. Certainly, this experience left a call for more project owner cooperation, which was not fulfilled.

Lantmännen Unibake – Project owner with multiple roles: Due to a general lack of project resources in sales, the project owner had to take on various roles in the project. Besides being the

project owner and a member of the steering committee, this person also acted as a member of the project team and as the project's primary contact with the customer. Yet, this was vulnerable, since the project owner frequently engaged in activities outside the project and had little time to participate in important project meetings. That the project owner was pressured for time slowed the pace of the project as time was spent waiting for answers and it led to poor communication and lack of alignment between the project team and the customer. The project owner acknowledged that it was unsatisfactory for the project manager that a member of the steering committee and the project owner became part of the project team, but it could not be helped since there were no other resources to choose from.

Novo Nordisk – dialogue instead of control: The project owner was invited to join weekly review meetings in this IT project. However, it proved to be a challenge. Even so, after the first participation, it was apparent that this was a very valuable constellation. Having the project owner in the room gave the project team a strong feeling of importance and energy. Besides, it gave the project owner valuable insight into a very important project. The project owner understood the importance of participation and delegated the responsibility to a subordinate, who actually could have been the project owner. This person started to turn up for the weekly review meetings. A few steering committee members also participated in these review meetings as part of the review team. In that way, they were always kept up to date; and as stated by the project manager, since the project was evaluated by people with insight, it gave the impression that the project was not governed by “outsiders”. After a while, a meeting set-up was established where the project owner was kept informed and was involved in steering group meetings and gate review meetings, whereas another key member of the steering group participated in the review meetings. Consequently, the project owner was very close to the project, and as a result, communication with the project owner shifted from control to trust. The project manager experienced the project owner's ongoing involvement as an asset to the project. She experienced the “dialogue instead of control” as beneficial.

GN Audio – Present with visible tasks: In this case, the project owner was deeply involved from the beginning and the project enjoyed a high degree of top management attention. The project owner participated in meetings and he was allocated tasks visible to all on the sprint plan. The project owner was responsible for the communication with the steering committee, for aligning expectations with senior managers as well as for the allocation of resources to the project. In that way, he was engaged in paving the way for the project in the wider organization and he went straight to the decision-makers

when needed. This continuous work was experienced as pivotal for a fast and steady project progression.

VELUX – Frequent meetings – making way in the organization: The project owner participated in weekly project meetings. These meetings involved pulse check discussions and discussions concerning selected areas of the project work. The walls of the meeting room would be covered with posters, key stakeholders would wrap up their final questions and a pulse check would reflect the room’s actual feel about the project. At these meetings, the project owner was informed about the status and progress of the project, but was also involved in discussing immediate challenges. The format was raw and unpolished, which was challenging at first, but it developed into an open and honest discussion and collaboration where the project owner actively engaged in the project and kept challenging decisions and prioritizations and impact realizations. Whenever needed, the project owner would talk to people in the organization to pave the way for the project and support the project’s overall vision.

Conclusion and implications

The six vignettes show that even if intentions are good and there is an explicit focus on project owner involvement, realization in practice is difficult. Three projects appear to establish a well-functioning collaboration between project owner and project manager while the three other projects struggle to make it happen due to the project owner’s lack of time and focus. A majority of the participating project managers recognize how the dedicated involvement and commitment of upper management, steering committee and project owner are crucial not only for the local implementation of the Half Double approach, but also for project success in general. Key stakeholder attention is important to a project and the project team’s sense of purpose and value creation. Even so, it is difficult to bring the project owner close to the project or to use the steering committee for active sparring, but when it does happen it makes a difference. Several of the project managers experienced a positive mood shift in the project team when they got attention and support from the project owner or other top management representatives. Still, in some organizations they could not find the required time and focus for that to happen. However, in spite of the explicit attention and insistence on active project ownership and despite Half Double consultants coaching the project managers on the importance of this matter, implementation and realization in practice remained difficult. Even though top management support and project owner involvement has been researched in several studies and from various perspectives

(Andersen, 2012; Hermano & Martín-Cruz, 2016; Karlsen, 2010; Too & Weaver, 2014; Turner & Müller, 2005; Young & Jordan, 2008), we still lack a more detailed and practice-oriented understanding of how the project owner role should be enacted and how a fruitful relationship between project owner and project manager unfolds.

There are a number of practical implications: First, the Half Double methodology sets up specific guidelines for the collaboration between project owner and project manager, but how do we insist on and convince the project owner to engage and spend time with the project? Some of the cases suggest that if the project owner actually experiences closeness to the project, he or she will also prioritize it. Another strategy could be to assign a qualified representative – a sort of proxy project owner – to participate in project meetings. However, such strategies and guidelines should be developed. Moreover, when the project owner does indeed engage in the project, how do we avoid conflicts of authority between the project owner and the project manager and how do we ensure a collaborative working relationship where the project owner is actively participating and the project manager is still empowered to manage the project? Research suggests that sound communication between the project owner and project manager becomes crucial (Müller & Turner, 2005) and the two parties have to establish a virtuous balance between trust and control (Zwikael & Smyrk, 2015); but how to achieve this virtuous balance? The experience of PHD does not provide clear answers to these questions. Certainly, this cannot be solved solely in terms of a project management methodology making the project manager aware of the importance of involving and collaborating with the project owner. It is also a question of top management not only realizing the necessity of investing in resource allocation and project promotion, but also the necessity of investing their own time and attention in project work procedures.

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