

# The subliminal characteristics of project managers: An exploratory study of optimism overcoming challenge in the project management work environment

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## Abstract

The personality characteristics of project managers have been studied but have eluded a conclusive understanding of the motivations of project managers especially in regard to their work environment. The current research looked at the optimism of project managers and whether optimism, innate or learned, would allow project managers to overcome the impediments associated with the work environment. Based on a literature review and the testing of certain personality characteristics against negative work environment characteristics, we presented data from 858 project managers and discuss insights for future research of this topic.

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## 1. Introduction

The competency of managers has long been considered an important contributor to an organization's ability to achieve its strategic goals [6,35]. And while success in project management is dependant on many variables, there are only a few key factors [12], one of which is the leadership or the interpersonal skills of project managers. Attention has recently been given to these "soft skills", the less tactical attributes of project managers [2,19,29,37,38,43]. As reviewed by 44, the management literature has long supported the contention that leadership is an integral asset of competency. In their research they found that competency can be segregated into a number of classifications, in particular, leadership as a managerial competency

has as one of its components, personal characteristics or traits. It makes intuitive sense that as project management has grown from a project oriented function to one more strategically aligned with the organization [7], the innate skills of project managers would also evolve from tacticians to more enterprise focused individuals. In effect, project managers are now beginning to emulate their general management counterparts wherein leadership skills are equal, if not more important, than functional discipline skills [6].

Our investigations of project managers consistently find outwardly expressed needs often reflecting well known issues associated with the daily practice of project management; inadequate resources, unclear objectives, lack of upper management support, changing priorities and the like. Yet despite ever present impediments to success, project managers seem to thrive and continue to enter the ranks of the profession in increasing numbers. Is there something in the personality of project managers that makes them especially well suited for this often chaotic and unpredictable work environment? We sought to better

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understand the issues associated with leadership characteristics of project managers; in particular, what skills or innate talents might arm them to effectively deal with this unique work environment. Our quest started with a literature review of the personality characteristics of project managers and, whether there was a correlation between these characteristics and project success. This led us to probe below the surface characteristics of project managers to examine whether there were innate or subliminal needs that act as drivers in their daily work environment. That research, to be later described, suggested to us that indeed there may be an overriding personality characteristic that allows project managers to work more efficiently in their work environment. The research we undertook focused on the following questions:

- Q1. Are successful project managers optimistic by nature, i.e. do they have a positive attitude toward life in general?
- Q2. Can optimism in project managers allow them, through their leadership, to overcome impediments often encountered in the project management work environment?

From our review of the personality trait literature we created a typology describing a set of positive personality characteristics as well as a set of antithetical work environments which would represent challenges to those positive characteristics. We tested these characteristics against our earlier research that had investigated both the superficial and subliminal needs of project managers. Our findings resulted in three hypotheses and a methodology for collecting and analyzing the data to test the hypotheses. The findings from 858 project managers are presented, followed by our conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature review

Traditionally, market research will elicit challenges and needs. Often however, there are subliminal or unconscious needs that are not expressed in these studies. These subliminal needs are often the most important to providing a level of satisfaction and accomplishment in one's work environment. By example, Rapaille [32] discovered that the initial exposure of individuals to emotions, events, smells, and words creates an innate and unique imprint that remains throughout life as a set of needs; what he refers to as "reptilian" or primal needs. Greenwald et al. [14] pioneered the use of the Implicit Association Test which measures the strength of implicit attitudes and other automatic associations involving two pairs of contrasted concepts. Understanding unspoken or innate needs in project managers may well define their motivations and ability to perform successfully in given work environments.

In 450 BC the Greek physician and philosopher Hippocrates wrote that each individual had a distinct temperament, or personality [17]. These were categorized as:

emotional or sensitive; detached or impassive; serious or sad; and, impulsive or excitable. In the ensuing centuries from Hippocrates time many personality theories have been proposed [22]. These include trait theories, psychodynamic theories, behaviorist theories, humanistic theories and cognitive and social-cognitive theories. Along with these theories of personality type various testing methods for classifying individuals have been developed. The better known tests include the Rorschach ink blot test, the thematic apperception test (TAT), the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and more recently the Big Five personality trait taxonomy, among many others. The TAT and Rorschach are projective tests, i.e. the assessment of the subject is based on what the individual projects on a given image. Each of these personality tests has application in specific situations and none is without its critics.

It has been recognized for some time that certain personality types lend themselves better to certain functions as compared to others; by example highly organized and detail oriented people are uncomfortable in chaotic situations or free-form environments [4]. The literature has examined these personality traits in many different ways. For example, the Enneagram model holds that there are nine distinct yet interconnected personality types named for behavioral characteristics. The Enneagram typology is from ancient sources and has been modified and adapted to many applications including group dynamics [33]. The Keirseyan Temperament Theory (Keirseyan, 1995) championed by Berens [3] holds that there are four distinct patterns into which individuals fall: the idealist (with diplomatic skills), the guardian (with logical skills), the rational (with strategic skills) and the artisan (with tactical skills). David Keirseyan found that the MBTI had combinations similar to his four temperaments. The Myers–Briggs classification of personality type [27] was developed by Katherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers in the 1940's following the theories of Carl Jung [16]. The MBTI is often used in organizational settings as a training or personnel development aid, and a large number of functional job descriptors have been assigned to MBTI personality types. Project managers have certain functional characteristics associated with their work environment that lend themselves well to MBTI classification, and several papers have been written describing MBTI type as it relates to project management. A recent paper by Turner and Müller [45] examines this further by looking at the interaction of personality type with project type. What can be said of many personality classifications is that one size does not fit all. That is, the Enneagram had its overlapping points and the Keirseyan model incorporated several MBTI types to accommodate its four temperaments. Accordingly we can expect that no one type would apply to any given job description. However, most of the project management literature focuses on MBTI classification, therefore, we will review those findings before exploring the Big Five traits.

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