



Understanding project champions' ability to gain intra-organizational commitment for environmental projects

Thomas F. Gattiker^{a,*}, Craig R. Carter^{b,1}

^a Department of Information Technology and Supply Chain Mgt., College of Business & Economics (MS 1615), Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725, USA

^b Managerial Sciences Department, College of Business Administration, University of Nevada, Mail Stop 0028, Reno, NV 89557, USA

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ABSTRACT

A key enabler of environmental projects is the ability of the project champion to gain commitment to the project from other stakeholders in his or her organization. This paper develops a model of commitment-gaining success that is based on intra-organizational influence theory. The model also includes project payback, customer pressure, government regulation, top management support and the project champion's position in the organizational hierarchy. The model was tested using survey data from 241 environmental professionals describing their attempts to gain the buy-in of purchasing managers, operations managers, industrial engineers and others for environmental projects. The results (obtained from hierarchical regression analysis) show that intra-organizational commitment is positively associated with the project champion's influence behavior—in particular, the champion's use of three influence tactics (inspirational appeals, consultation and rational persuasion) and avoidance of a fourth tactic (ingratiation). Commitment is also positively associated with project payback and with top management support for the environment and negatively associated with environmental regulation. The paper contributes to the OM knowledge base on environmental project implementation by bringing new theory to bear on the topic, by focusing on individual-level, rather than organization-level, variables and by taking a confirmatory, large sample approach which complements extant exploratory research. In addition, the paper contributes to the OM field by evaluating various antecedents to cross-functional integration. The results also provide specific guidance to those who champion environmental projects within their companies.

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1. Introduction

Research using self reports and archival data demonstrates that environmental management can lead to better environmental performance (Klassen and Whybark, 1999; Zhu and Sarkis, 2004) and firm performance at both the operations and financial levels (Klassen and McLaughlin, 1996; Klassen and Whybark, 1999; Carter et al., 2000; Pil and Rothenberg, 2003). This is due in part to cost savings associated with reduced waste (Rosenau et al., 1996; Mollenkopf et al., 2005), reduced discharges (Zhu and Sarkis, 2004), shorter lead times, and better product quality (Montabon et al., 2000; Hanson et al., 2004), along with an enhanced reputation among suppliers and customers (Ellen et al., 2006), current employees (Kassinis and Vafeas, 2003), potential employees (Capaldi, 2005), and shareholders (Klassen and McLaughlin,

1996). However, in many organizations there is a gap between the desire to be environmentally responsible and the degree to which environmental management is actually practiced—i.e., in many companies, high level policy and values statements are in place, but corresponding operations and supply chain-level programs and practices have not manifested themselves widely (Preuss, 2001; Institute for Supply Management, 2007). One reason for this gap is that, while organizations often attempt environmental initiatives, the programs are not always successfully implemented (Carter and Dresner, 2001). This suggests a need for research on factors that contribute to successful implementation of environmental projects.

Since environmental initiatives frequently require changes to business practices and reward systems, these projects often encounter resistance by personnel in various functional areas across the organization (Drumwright, 1994; Carter and Dresner, 2001; Carter et al., 2007a). This is particularly significant in light of the fact that many environmental initiatives are begun at the grass roots or middle levels of the organization—by individuals who lack the positional power to simply force others to “get on board” (Drumwright, 1994; Adams, 2004; Friend, 2007).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 208 426 4998.

E-mail addresses: tomgattiker@boisestate.edu (T.F. Gattiker), crcarter@unr.edu (C.R. Carter).

¹ Tel.: +1 775 682 9168.

Numerous case studies have found that a key to overcoming intra-organizational resistance and other barriers is the ability of a project champion to gain the *buy-in* or *commitment* of others in the company, particularly across functional/departmental boundaries (Drumwright, 1994; Handfield et al., 1997; Crane, 2000; Carter and Jennings, 2004; Carter et al., 2007a,b; Willard, 2008). For example, a conclusion of one study (Handfield et al., 1997, p. 311) is “The common thread within all of the companies studied is that environmental management cannot succeed when the responsibility is delegated to specialists.” Rather a variety of functional areas must participate (Handfield et al., 1997). In fact, how one gains the commitment of others to environmental projects, especially when those others do not consider the environment as “part of my job,” is one of five future research priorities identified by Handfield et al. (1997) study. In spite of this, the operations management (OM) and supply chain fields have produced little research, especially confirmatory research, on the role of the individual environmental management champion in bringing about change. The present paper helps to fill this gap by asking the research question, *what determines the ability of project advocates to gain the cross-functional commitment of other stakeholders in their organization for environmental management projects?* In this context, examples of environmental management projects include changing the materials used in a product (e.g., from virgin to recycled content inputs) or used in running the business (e.g., replacing solvents that contain high volatile organic compounds); using less of a particular input (e.g., reducing energy consumption through purchasing Energy Star compliant computers); and implementing new facilities management practices (Handfield et al., 1997; Melnyk et al., 2003; Montabon et al., 2007; Tate et al., 2007).

Only a few existing studies address this research question. And, those that do employ an exploratory approach (Drumwright, 1994; Carter and Dresner, 2001). Our research extends and complements these works by using a large sample, deductive approach and by bringing existing, well-validated theory to bear on the problem. In particular, we draw on intra-organizational influence theory (Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl and Falbe, 1990), which is described in the next section.

Within OM, the topic of gaining intra-organizational commitment, especially in a cross-functional context, has implications well beyond the domain of environmental projects. Management commitment is a recurring factor in OM literature dealing with a wide variety of project and process implementation efforts—for example, Total Quality Management implementation (Flynn et al., 1994; Samson and Terziovski, 1999), JIT purchasing initiatives (Kaynak and Hartley, 2006), new product development success (Swink, 1999; Swink et al., 2006), MRP/ERP implementation (Petroni, 2002; Stratman and Roth, 2002) and capital project execution (Scott-Young and Samson, 2008). Lack of management commitment is a significant barrier to healthcare patient safety initiatives (McFadden et al., 2006) and to information technology implementation success in manufacturing and services (Sohal et al., 2001). Similarly, lateral or cross-functional cooperation is associated with improvements in quality (Flynn et al., 1995a,b), flexibility (Alder et al., 1999) and project management success (Pinto et al., 1993). Inter-functional integration leads to numerous positive outcomes, including manufacturing performance (Cua et al., 2001; Sawhney and Piper, 2002), financial performance (O’Leary-Kelly and Flores, 2002) and employee morale (Hausman et al., 2002). However, in spite of their importance, the OM literature lacks investigations into the factors that lead to management commitment and inter-functional integration. By examining antecedents of cross-functional buy-in, this study plays an important part in filling this gap.

The next section reviews the literature and explains the research model. As we then describe, the model is tested using survey data collected from environmental professionals who have attempted to gain the commitment of another stakeholder within their organization for an environmental project. Finally, we discuss the study’s results and contributions.

2. Literature review and research model

2.1. Antecedents of environmental management

Existing studies have identified a number of factors that explain differences from company to company in the degree to which various forms of environmental management are practiced. Such factors include top management support (Drumwright, 1994; Carter and Jennings, 2004; Pagell and Wu, 2009), middle management support (Carter et al., 1998), firm size (Bowen, 2002), regulatory pressure (Porter and van der Linde, 1995; Green et al., 1996; Min and Galle, 2001; Preuss, 2001), customer influence (Drumwright, 1994; Green et al., 1996; Carter et al., 1998; Min and Galle, 2001; Carter, 2004), and the competitive environment (Pagell et al., 2007). One important commonality of these studies is that most of the explanatory variables are *organization-level* and are beyond the immediate control of the individual project advocate. As a result, existing studies have yielded significant insight into the organization- and industry-level factors that explain variation from company to company in the degree to which environmental management is practiced; however, the existing confirmatory literature offers much less guidance to the individual who might ask, “What should I do in order to move environmental initiatives forward at my company? What actions should I engage in or avoid?” Thus our model focuses at this level—i.e., on whether individual behaviors make a difference and if so what are some individual behaviors that are important? This level of analysis is relevant because, as noted above, many environmental initiatives are championed by individuals at mid and lower levels of the organizational hierarchy—i.e., by individuals who lack the positional power to mandate others’ compliance and who therefore typically rely on less formal mechanisms to influence others (Drumwright, 1994; Carter and Dresner, 2001; Carter et al., 2007a,b).

2.2. Commitment

As noted in the introduction, existing research has found that the ability of the project advocate to gain the commitment of others is a key to successfully implementing environmental management projects. Therefore commitment is the dependent variable in the present study. *Commitment* to a project exists when individuals internalize or become sympathetic to a project’s goals (Mowday et al., 1979). Commitment leads to persistence and extra effort in bringing a project to fruition, especially when the project faces barriers (Mowday et al., 1979; Becker et al., 1996).

2.3. Theory of intra-organizational influence

Noting the importance of commitment, a number of researchers have sought to understand behaviors by which individuals influence other individuals (subordinates, superiors, peers) within their organizations in order to gain their commitment to various projects, objectives, etc. Scholars have conceptualized the intra-organizational influence process as consisting of an *agent* who seeks to influence a *target* individual in a single or multiple-incident *influence attempt* using one or more *influence tactics* in order to produce some *outcome* (Table 1). Researchers have proposed and validated numerous individual tactics and taxonomies of tactics that individuals use to influence others in the

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