

Succeeding with Senior Management
Getting the right support at the right time for your project
By G. Michael Campbell, PMP
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

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Introduction

A very useful introduction to this book has been written by Dr. Gary L. Richardson, PMI Professor of Project Management at the University of Houston. He says:¹

"They're everybody's dream assignments – the ones that offer you chances to work directly with senior executives. These opportunities can be launch pads for career success – or lead to misfires that can set you back. It all depends on how well you 'speak executive'. Fluency in the motivations and methods of the C-suite is an essential skill for PMs on the rise, but it is not a natural one. This book, *Succeeding with Senior Management* is the first and only book out there to correct this critical gap.²

Project managers are innately task-focused and detail oriented. In contrast, executives are more focused on overall business goals and often impatient with minutia. That mental divide often leads to miscommunication that alienates executives and sabotages projects. That miscommunication is a deal breaker when you get to the high visibility projects where you simply cannot succeed without engaging the support of senior management.

This back-page text goes on to explain:

You'll learn to: • Think like an executive • Prepare the leadership for success • Build relationships and trust • Master executive-effective communications • Use executives' deputies effectively • Overcome cross-functional issues • Navigate political waters • Engage senior managers on multi-national projects • Handle initiatives that compete with your project • And more.

If you can succeed in all of that you will certainly be doing well, but to do so you first have to find the right project environment where all of this is going on. Given the previous descriptions, one can visualize the sort of organization involved. Not just your ordinary construction company, or your ordinary software company for that matter. It is much more likely with some big organization with a large staff that is involved in international operations, most likely working on high-technology development work and no doubt with some government involvement.

Such opportunities are inevitably severely limited, and you are unlikely to get there in a single leap. You will have to gather relevant experience through smaller organizations where, nonetheless, the advice contained in this book will still be most valuable.

Our take on this book is a little different. Ever since the production of the first Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK 1987) document, we have bewailed the weakness of the project management knowledge area referred to as *Information and Communications Management*. The majority of this book fills that gap most admirably and is, therefore, a valuable addition to any project manager's library.

About the author

G. Michael Campbell, PMP, has more than 30 years of experience as a project manager. He has a Bachelor's degree from Ohio University and a Master's degree from John Carroll University. He has managed many large, global projects involving senior executives. He is the author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Project Management* and *Communications Skills for Project Managers* (AMACOM Books).

Book Structure

The content of this book is set out in twenty-two chapters as follows

Chapters:

1. Understanding the Facts of Life for Executives
2. Preparing the Leadership
3. Questions Every Project Manager Really Needs Answered
4. Establishing the Relationship and Managing Up the Organization
5. Working with the Executive Sponsor to Understand the Project
6. Reviewing the Stakeholder Analysis with Your Sponsor
7. Listening Styles and How Using Them Effectively Helps You to Engage an Executive
8. Your Attitude and Its Role in Engaging an Executive
9. Preparing Sponsors for Their Role
10. Clearly Establishing the Communication Channels to Stakeholders
11. Creating Internal and External Communications with the Sponsor
12. Using Deputies of Executives Effectively
13. Executing Risk Management Strategies and Executive Sponsor Support
14. Addressing Scope with the Sponsor
15. Providing Options and Recommendations for Key Decisions
16. Communicating Problems and Issues with the Sponsor
17. Communicating with Operations Using the Sponsor
18. Using the Sponsor to Gain Operations Support
19. Getting Help with Cross-Functional Issues
20. Navigating the Political Waters
21. Engaging Senior Managers When You Have a Multinational, Cross-Cultural Project
22. Handling Competition with Other Initiatives

The book has a total of 220 pages and the contents include a number of figures to illustrate the material being discussed. Each chapter concludes with a brief bulleted list under the heading "Points to Remember".

What we liked

This book contains a very thorough coverage of the sorts of "communications" challenges that anyone is likely to experience while working in an intensive people-activity organization. Such organizations may range from volunteer societies, to government services, to health services, to Internet services. And that is let alone the hi-tech projects in which our author, Michael Campbell, obviously excels. Indeed, the author recounts well over 100 "stories" that he has experienced directly or indirectly, and in every case he provides recommended approaches for dealing with each.

For the project manager, as the book's title suggests, it is all about "Getting the right support at the right time for your project." And as indicated in our Introduction to this Review, or as reflected by the list of chapter contents, this book covers a wide range of "People-situations" typically encountered in a large project with a large number of "stakeholders" involved. Many of the recommendations may seem to the reader to be more or less obvious and straight forward when presented. Unfortunately, the recommended responses do not necessarily come to mind when you are faced with any one of them yourself, especially when the awesome image of senior management gets involved.

So this is the value of this book, effectively a primer on communicating on all matters project related, especially including upper management, all based on the author's own practical experience.

Perhaps even more significantly, the key player in all of this, aside from yourself, is your project's sponsor. Not only is "Sponsor" identified in over 40% of the chapter titles but in fact occurs in every single chapter in the book. So what if your project does not have a sponsor, or at least have someone effectively in that role? Or worse yet, someone who is formerly appointed to the project sponsor's position but either has no idea what is required, or no interest in appropriate involvement? If you do not deal with this upfront, your project will be in trouble from the get go.

The following are several examples of the author's advice more or less chosen at random to demonstrate the value of this book.

Choosing a Project Champion³

"The idea of having an executive sponsor has been around for a long time. [But] . . . most of us who have managed projects for any length of time recognize, it is often very difficult to keep sponsors engaged throughout a long project so that they are ready to help you at key junctures. That is why I believe it is important to turn to the additional role of project champion. In my experience, the best candidate for champion has some critical characteristics that help you make a project successful."

The author goes on to describe four bullets covering such a person's attributes and how they can help.

Defining the Scope⁴

"As part of my engagement with my sponsor, I was reviewing the Scope Statement that included what was in scope and what I believed to be out of scope. Imagine my surprise when my sponsor told me that he expected customized training as a part of preparing people for the go-live. As you can imagine, this was a big deal for the project."

"[However,] I was able to have a conversation in which I expressed my opinion that the budget for the project did not seem to include enough money to cover more people – those I would need to build customized training. After I presented an estimate on what the additional cost would be, my sponsor went to the other executive stakeholders to find out if they would support additional money to build customized training [They] decided that the generic training would be enough after all. Basically, they wanted customized training but were not keen on paying for it."

Common Language for Business: English⁵

"[I]magine a situation where the project team is composed of individuals from multiple countries and English is a second language for many of them. The potential for misunderstandings or misquotes is much higher. In these projects, I work very hard to explain the risks involved and to collaborate with my sponsor to secure the services of a communications specialist for the project. I truly believe that having an individual who is fluent in English and the dominant native language of the largest number of the project team is the best way to ensure successful communications."

The author does not mention where, in the budget, money for such a person might be found.

Listening Styles⁶

One of the chapters we found most useful is *Chapter 7: Listening Styles and How Using Them Effectively Helps You to Engage an Executive*. Obviously, in any message especially verbal, listening is the necessary companion to sending. Without listening capability on the part of the audience, the message becomes an abject failure. So, in this chapter our author discusses *Listening Styles*.

As he says:

"First of all, Kittie Watson, PhD, and Larry Barker, PhD, have done some great work in helping people understand the listening styles that people employ. The styles they identify are:

- People-oriented: They are concerned with how people will react.
- Action-oriented: They want someone to get to the point quickly.
- Content-oriented: They value technical information and data.
- Time-oriented: They are very conscious of time, particularly wasting time.

Each of these listening styles has strengths and weaknesses. Let's look at each of them in more detail."

Author Michael Campbell then goes on to tabulate the *Strengths and Weaknesses* of each of these four styles, followed by a general review under such headings as: *Purpose of the Communication*; *Target*; *Potential Barriers*; *Jargon and Acronyms*; and *Formal versus Informal*.

Downside

Almost of necessity, this book is written from the perspective of the author's own personal experience. A large part of this experience that he describes is about his relationship and interaction with the sponsor of the project in question. Particularly missing seems to be any mention of his chief assistant, the Manager of Product Development. Consequently, one is left with an impression that suggests there are really only two people of importance in the management of a large project, even though a "large project" by definition involves a very large number of people.

At the same time, one should express sympathy for the sponsor who has to deal with all of these situations as described, while doing whatever he or she has to do as a regular day-job responsibility. However, from the reader's perspective, the advice that the author offers is of considerable value to any project manager running a much smaller project, but where there are still more than half-a-dozen

stakeholders.

As a separate issue, we found that the referencing in the book was rather unhelpful. It was difficult to find any specific reference that we wanted to recall. The chapter listings are rather cryptic and the index often unhelpful. To find a particular story we had in mind, we had to search for the particular header by thumbing through the whole book. It would be a big benefit if all of the chapter subheadings and sub-sub headings were to be listed with their respective page numbers. Further, if this list were to be grouped logically, the book would be a valuable reference to have at hand in time of crisis.

Summary

As we hinted in our introduction, the value of this book is that its content fills the large gaps that exist in the documentation of *Information and Communication Management* content of PMBOK publications. All project managers should treasure this book accordingly.

¹ *Succeeding with Senior Management* by G. Michael Campbell, PMP, AMACOM, New York, US, 2017, on the back cover.

² At least up to this date, 2017.

³ *Ibid*, p15.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp 128-129.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp 189-190.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp 63-68