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Progress comes through projects

Meet Dr. Ralf Müller, the winner of the PMI Fellow Award 2016

Recently Dr. Ralf Müller was awarded the PMI Fellow of the Institute Award 2016 at the Global Congress in San Diego, USA. Johan Persson from the PMI Sweden Chapter took the opportunity to catch up with the winner in order to learn more about him and his latest research.

[J.P.] What was your first contact with PMI?

[R.M.] "In the early 1990's I was working for the NCR Corporation's German subsidiary in a department that dealt with major accounts. We were about 10-15 project managers and our department manager was working hard on improving project management capabilities for us as a department.

After one of his trips to our headquarters in the US he came back and said; well guys I have heard about an organization named Project Management Institute. They do exactly what we want. They have an ambition to develop standards for how to do project management and they also want to offer certifications.

This was exactly what we aimed for within our department so it was exactly in line with our intentions; to improve and standardize the way we do projects. That was the starting point."

[J.P.] "What was the state of the PMI Sweden Chapter when you moved to Malmö in Sweden?"

[R.M.] "When I moved to Sweden in the year 2000, I heard that there was a chapter in Stockholm. So, at that time there was only activity in that area. I contacted the chapter and got a response back that I was welcome to join their chapter but there were no activities yet in the south of Sweden.

A couple of years later the group in southern Sweden was formed. I joined them but was not very active. I participated in steering committee meetings, gave presentations and reported on my research studies, but I did not take a leading role as such. This had to do with the language issues that I had in the beginning and also with the time that I could devote to my PMI related activities."

[J.P.] "Given your long experience of project management and leadership. Why would you say that Project Management is relevant to industries and institutions in 2016?"

[R.M.] "Well, the relevance comes from the need to tailor management to the activities on hand. In other words; nowadays we only deliver bespoke products. We don't deliver standard products, if we look at the majority of industry output.

So, if we deliver tailored products then we need to have tailored management to create these products. Here is where project management comes in place.

Let's say we have a product or service that we want to deliver that needs to be tailored to the customer, then we adjust the processes, the control structures and the planning to the particularities of these tailored products. That is what we do in project management."

[J.P.] "Today there are a lot of discussions going on about digital transformation and Industry 4.0 and similar. Do you feel that the industry is mature enough and ready to work properly with tailored project management?"

[R.M.] "To some extent. I don't think that we can generalize and say that the industry is 100 percent ready for it. It will probably never be the case and it might be good so. On the other hand, progress as such comes through projects. Here is where we need to tailor our production approaches which is project management. A project manager is an agent of a company that delivers a product. Through that, the project management, by this project manager needs to be tailored to whatever the product is.

I think that we will see more and more specializations. The field of project management will diversify more and more. In recent years we have seen a diversification in agile, we've seen it in open source projects which is very different from construction projects or engineering projects in a traditional setting.

So I think the landscape will be more and more diversified in the coming years. Project management will be tailored to particular circumstances. Even the old idea of IT project management being different from construction will probably be overcome by the question; what is the nature of the product that we need to deliver? This means that one type of product will need one type of project management and another product another one. It will no longer depend on the industry, but on the characteristics of the delivery."

[J.P.] "Please describe your current area of research."

[R.M.] "I have two main areas of research. One is governance of projects, programs and portfolios. The other subject is leadership. Currently PMI is funding a study on Balanced Leadership. That is the question of; when does leadership in a project swing from the project manager to a team member and when does it swing back?"

We try to identify the process used by project managers, to find out who can answer what question in the team, who is reliable and who can I trust to take the lead of the team when it comes to areas that I am not sufficiently knowledgeable in?

Once they are identified. How are they selected and presented to the team as temporary leaders? How is the leadership handed over to them? How do they do their work with the team members, and how is the leadership then handed back to the project manager? We call this Balanced Leadership; the balance between the vertical leadership by the project manager and the horizontal leadership by the team."

[J.P.] "Would you say that leadership is more important than ever in Project Management?"

[R.M.] "Yes, leadership is certainly growing in importance and in projects it is at least as important as management. More generally speaking, there are several studies that show that the soft factors are more influential on project success than the hard factors.

One of my studies on Project Management leadership competences and their influence on project success showed that one leadership related success factor, is the project manager's personality. On

average it accounted for 9% of the project success. In successful engineering and construction projects this went up to 43% (in IT 21% and change projects 17%) of the project success being traceable back to the project manager's personality as a success factor".

[J.P.] "What do you see as the most important future trends in project management?"

[R.M.] "One important trend is that project management becomes a competitive weapon. More than it was before. The ability to deliver projects successfully will be more of a criteria in marketing the company's products and services. That leads to the question; how can we be competitive in the market? I see a necessity which is not yet completely fulfilled by the parties, but I see it on the horizon. That is a stronger integration of practitioners and academics in project management.

If you look at the way we write the standards within PMI today. It is 99 percent work of practitioners. There is very little influence from academics. If you read academic journals on project management you see so many solutions to the problems that practitioners have. But, unfortunately these two groups do not talk to each other. At least not sufficiently enough.

I see a need for these two groups to merge, to work jointly on solving problems and tailoring project management to the needs of the product. That way companies or maybe even our whole profession of project managers can become more competitive in the future."

BIO

Dr. Ralf Müller [Born 1957] is Professor of Project Management at BI Norwegian Business School and their former Associate Dean for the BI-Fudan MBA programmes in China. He is also an Associated Member of the Project Management Research Chair at the School of Management, University of Quebec in Montreal, Adjunct Professor at SKEMA Business School in France and visiting faculty member at Tias Business School / Tilburg University, The Netherlands as well as several other Universities worldwide. In the past he was Professor of Business Administration at Umeå University, Sweden (2002-2012).

Ralf Müller received his Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) from Henley Management College / Brunel University, UK, and his MBA from Herriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, UK. Among the many accolades Dr Müller has received are the 2015 PMI Research Achievement Award (a life-time achievement award) and the 2012 IPMA Research Award.

Prior to joining the academic world Dr. Müller spent 25 years in the industry where he worked in 47 different countries for the improvement of project management in large organizations and governments. He contributed to the PMI Standards for Organizational Project Management Maturity (OPM3), as well as Program and Portfolio Management.

ABOUT THE AWARD

In brief, the recognition is awarded to a person who has demonstrated significant and sustained contributions to PMI for a minimum of ten (10) consecutive years. The recipient should also have made significant contributions to the project management profession. The contributions should be global in value, benefiting the worldwide project management.

A FEW QUICK FACTS

Dr. Ralf Müller was part of a group consisting of three people who founded the PMI Frankfurt Chapter, the first ever chapter in Europe and the second one outside of the USA. He also co-founded the Munich Chapter. Today, those chapters have almost 3000 members.

Last year Dr. Müller finished a study funded by PMI on the Enablers of Project Governance. Almost 5000 people signed up to a PMI webinar held in September 2016 to take part of his research findings.

Dr. Mullers latest Balanced Leadership study is a global study involving eight teams across the World. Recently, the first reports from that study have been published.

FURTHER READING

September 2016 saw the premiere of Dr. Ralf Müllers latest book “Governance and Governmentality for Projects: Enablers, Practices, and Consequences”. The material is based on approximately 20 years of research.

[LINK TO BOOK SITE]

<https://www.routledge.com/Governance-and-Governmentality-for-Projects-Enablers-Practices-and-Consequences/Muller/p/book/9781138926356>

The book is a research-based book on governance and governmentality in the realm of projects, or organizational project governance, as it is called in the book. The aim is to provide the reader with a chronological framework of project-related governance and governmentality as it unfolds in organizations, and how this framework links into corporate governance.

The reader learns not only about the practices and approaches to governance and governmentality, but also about the theoretical implications that stem from the research findings. Therefore, it is a source for both those in search of different practices and those in search of understanding. To that end, it is a “why and what” book, and not a “how to” book. For the latter the reader is referred to the large number of consultant books on the market. For the former this book will be a source of many new insights and perspectives.

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