3. JohnCable: Pragmatism from the Ivory Tower

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00:01 Speaker 1: I see a future in which the individuals that are involved in project management have far superior people skills to the ones today.

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00:12 Announcer: From the Washington DC chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

00:22 Speaker 2: Many of us think of project management as a practitioner's art. It's about getting things done. So I'm curious as to how it's also now a field of academic inquiry. I'm told that in 1999, there were roughly 12 universities that had degree programs in project management. And now there's 600. One of the early educators is Mr John Cable, and we're lucky to have him in our Beltway area. John is the director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at the Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland. A licensed architect and general contractor and a PMP. He has quite a history with project management, with academia, and the intersection of the two. He's the chairman Emeritus of PMI's Global Accreditation Center, which accredits project management degree programs around the world. A member of the Science and Engineering Council of NASA's Center for Program and Project Management Research. And is a founding member of the International Project Management Educational Union.

01:13 S2: John sees the world from an interesting point of view, a practitioner and an educator. And if you met him you'd think he's a PM proselytizer. So we have the right guy to give us the insight, but still, what is all this study telling us about the role of project management in the future?

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01:31 S1: The program at the Clark school really is distinctive. It's based on a master's degree program. There are two masters, the master of science or a master of engineering. Each requires a minimum of 30 credit hours of course work. That course work has five core courses that are... You could probably name them all, an introduction, a law course, an accounting course, teams course, and performance management. How do you measure project performance? So that's project performance management is the course.

02:01 S2: Let me try to understand all that, you mention like for example law and economics, around project management.

02:06 S1: On project management.

02:08 S2: Interesting. So what would be an example of the content around law and project management?

02:13 S1: Most people that are involved in projects and the project management arena are dealing with contracts. So it's a law course aimed at engineering contract law, taught in the construct of the American law practice.

02:26 S2: And even the economics of it, I assume you're talking more than the pure cost of a project? You're talking something broader in that case?

02:32 S1: The name in that particular course is Project Cost Accounting and Finance. And the notion is, we're not trying to teach the student to be an accountant at all, what we are trying to teach them to do is to read what the accountant produces and understand what it means. And then the other piece of that course is a little bit about how projects get financed, what are those metrics and how do they influence decisions perhaps you need to make as a project manager. We also have a PhD and they draw from the same courses, but of course a PhD student does a tremendous amount of research on their own.

03:07 S2: What types of topics have you seen in that?

03:11 S1: We have a complete range from stuff that focuses on the human factor side in dealing with negotiations, conflict resolution, how do you build high performance teams and things that are what you and I might think of as the softer side of the subject...

03:29 S2: Organizational development.

03:30 S1: Organizational development. Yeah, exactly. And then there's a healthy number of students that do work in risk analysis and scheduling and they're doing all kinds of quantitative analytics on some aspect of projects. And then there's a policy grouping. So the interesting thing is that project management is a very big umbrella. And there's not one little niche or one little channel that we can cover on a PhD or a master's thesis.

04:06 S2: Is the goal then to raise the level of project management understanding, or is it more to find where all project management can be applied? I'm trying to see why is there an academic track? Fundamentally, why do we need this?

04:18 S1: The reason that project management degree programs exist is in response to customer demand. I try to interview incoming master students, and I say, "Why do you wanna study project management?" And here's the generic answer, "Well, sir, I'm a, fill in the blank, mechanical engineer, fire protection engineer, whatever. And I've been out of school seven years. I'm in a work environment where I'm really comfortable with my engineering skills. But I've begun to be given assignments where I have to manage other people. I have to manage tasks. I'm going to be in a position where I have to manage projects. I don't know what I'm doing." I really believe pretty strongly that in our community our kids come... I want them to get their undergraduate in mechanical engineering or electrical engineering or civil engineering or architecture, whatever it is. But then I want them to come back as a master student. And add to that basic technical skill, the projects skills. We don't teach them, 'This is the answer', we teach them, "How do you approach it?" We teach people how to think about the problems.

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05:47 S1: I've got two very seasoned managers in there. They probably have somewhere in the range of 15 to 20 years of experience. They manage a whole bunch of people, whole bunch of projects, portfolios. And we're at the end of the semester, what I've gotten from feedback from these two individuals is, "I have learned so much because this semester has given me the opportunity to reflect and think about what I do. And you've shown me approaches to that that make a whole lot of sense. Some of this stuff I did it and I don't know why I did it, I just did it. It worked, it worked, but I did it. Now I understand why it worked." We're trying to teach critical thinking skills, understanding the framework, how do you think about it, how do you diagnose it.

06:36 S2: That's really interesting. And one of the other guest speakers that we've had for this podcast when asked, what is the singles biggest gap or, what are the big gaps you see with project managers or when do you get frustrated? Where does the happy land break down? There were two comments that I thought were very interesting. One was, when project managers don't actually follow their project management rules, that's the first one.

[chuckle]

07:00 S1: They're not actually following by their own rule set. But the other one was, ultimately, it's a critical thinking problem, that was the gap. What is your solution for that? Part of it sounds like training.

07:10 S1: In the critical thinking skills, we're looking for individuals that have a very unique characteristic in one sense. And that characteristic is somebody that can think in the macro view and in the micro view, not either or, but to zoom in and out. They can keep their eye on the big picture but zoom in on the detail necessary to make the detail things happen, but do so in a way that they're not deviating from the big picture. And then, how do you be sure that you, in a project that unfolds over a multi year period of time, the world changes, a lot of factors change, are the critical assumptions that were made to launch this project still valid? Do we need to go back with the customer and do some mid-course corrections?

07:58 S1: So, we're really focused on helping students learn how to do that, to approach it that way. When we got started all of the master's degree programs taught fundamentals of project management because everybody wanted to know fundamentals. And now, there is always a continuing need for fundamentals, but there's an evolving need for much more sophisticated applications. To be candid, a lot of the students that come to us already are PMPs. They're trying to go further, they're trying to advance and that's what we help them do.

08:34 S2: Given that so many institutions of educations now are engaged in more professional development and more development, it sounds like of the practice itself, what do you anticipate seeing change in project management itself?

08:48 S1: I see a future that may be through rose-colored glasses, but it's one in which the individuals that are involved in project management have far superior people skills to the ones today. That they create an environment within which good people can flourish. I see that evolving as they get more well-educated and have a better understanding of themselves, how they interrelate with people, how to create the environment within which good people can do their jobs, and how to be a facilitator and then a motivator.

09:29 S2: Will we see a world where it's less project manager and more project teams? We really focus a lot on the manager as a communicator, but you're moving past communication into some more behavioral support.

09:43 S1: It's not the project manager that delivers the job, it's the project team that delivers the job. The manager has a critical role and we don't wanna diminish the value of that critical role. But every member of that team has a critical role. And every one of them has a project management responsibility that they need to own, step in, and execute. Doing so, thinking about the team as a whole, understanding their part in it. Leadership doesn't just happen at the top, leadership happens at every level.

10:17 S2: So it seems like you may be teaching people to be better team members?

10:21 S1: We try to.

10:22 S2: What's going to happen to project management itself? How does that change in the future?

10:27 S1: Project management as a discipline has become more interesting to more people because they understand that no matter what job they're in, part of it has to do with getting the job done. It's no longer that, "Oh, the architects and the engineers and the contractors, they need project management 'cause they build things." But everything we do is a project in essence. And so, I think part of the evolution that's occurring is that the business world is beginning to embrace and understand more and more that they need to think about their world in the construct of, how do we get it done? How do we deliver projects?

11:15 S2: The business community will start projectizing things more or seeing things in that lens, through that lens?

11:20 S1: I think they're gonna see it in that lens more than they are right now. I think they're also gonna understand that they have to create the environment within which projects can succeed. As a corporate executive, what are the things you need to pay attention to so that down the line in your organization projects can be successful?

11:40 S2: This is fascinating. So it's a business problem or business application?

11:44 S1: Yeah, and most of the university programs in project management are in business schools. And I think part of the other thing that the natural evolution that we're gonna see is as our project managers get promoted in, become those executives, then they're going to be much better as executives understanding what the project teams need.

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12:08 S2: Special thanks to today's guest, Mr John Cable. Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Post production performed at Empowered Strategies, and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope and get it done.