Many major industrial projects now routinely undergo Independent Project Reviews (IPRs). For financed projects the reviews may be obligatory, but more importantly, in recent times the project sponsors and participants have found immense value in well-conducted IPRs and by themselves are promoting IPRs for their projects. Unfortunately, some projects still resort to IPRs when they find themselves in a performance bind. In such circumstances, IPRs tend to be more palliative than curative.

Several articles have appeared in the past decade or so on the whys, whats, whens, whos and hows of IPRs, written by veteran practicing project managers and consultants. There is hardly any need or possibility to add to the information contained in these articles, but there seems to be a need to touch upon the key to effective IPRs by discussing some of the common pitfalls.

I do not pretend to postulate new IPR theories; instead, the article is based on common sense and experience.

Independent Project Reviews
The IPR is an important project management mechanism to support project participants and sponsors towards performance excellence. The IPR is a second, unbiased, expert assessment of project health; the first being the ongoing project evaluation by project teams and sponsors. If conducted by

Avi Sangameswaran
a team of objective, fair, and diversely experienced project managers, specialists and consultants, the IPR adds value by identifying additional actions which, when implemented, will improve project performance.

The success of an IPR depends on the value-added contribution it makes to improved project performance. To that extent, how well the IPR team can sell this added value to project participants and sponsors determines the chances of its acceptance and implementation. Thus, in addition to the techniques and methodology of IPRs, there is a human relations angle to deal with—the anxiety, the complexities of human interaction.

IPR vs. Audit
Sometimes, an IPR is termed an “audit.” I believe that is a misnomer. There are differences between IPRs and audits.

An audit is really a postmortem of actual performance in the past. It has an undertone of criticism of past performance. To some extent, it is like “Monday morning quarterbacking” of what could have been done and what should not have been done. Above all, audit has a punitive connotation.

An Independent Project Review, on the contrary, concentrates on future improvement opportunities. No doubt, an IPR uses past performance to learn from and to encourage future excellence while discouraging poor performance. For an IPR, what is going right and why is as important as what is going wrong and why. The former motivates continuation of right actions of the past, while the latter demotivates wrongs through corrective action. Through observations of past performance and projections for future performance, the IPR results in firm recommendations and comprehensive action plans to implement improvement opportunities.

Real vs. Hidden Objectives
Although the explicit, publicized objective of an IPR often is to seek improved performance in the project as a whole, it is not uncommon for project sponsors and participants to use hidden agendas. I have observed sponsors using IPRs to sell their ideas, voice their concerns, bury their negligence, fight their battles with contractors, and to support internal sensitive actions (for example, organizational and personnel changes). IPRs indeed should reveal opportunities, if any, for performance improvements in various aspects of the project. However, partial or narrow interests and actions of the sponsors and project participants cannot lead to performance excellence. Just as “partial” cure of cancer with unabated spread in other parts of the body can doom a patient, likewise a partial project cure may not abate the overall disease in a project.

Thus, the idea of an IPR is to treat the whole and not the parts, to provide not destructive criticism of one part, person, or entity, but to provide constructive criticism and affirmative action for the project as a whole. For this, the sponsors have to be honest and open, and the IPR teams impartial, unbiased, and above internal politics and parochial interests. The teams have to be firm, but polite, and should not compromise on their professional views.

I have experienced suppression of IPR reports when they revealed that the project objectives had been highly compromised and that some of the key problems had originated from the sponsor. I have also experienced sponsors changing their objectives and asking IPR teams to divert their attention to contractors’ performance when the sponsors themselves were revealed to be a part or the whole of the problem. Quite often, the tone of the IPR teams and IPR reports tend to put the sponsors and project participants in a defensive posture.

IPR Dos and Don’ts
None Superior, None Inferior. IPR teams are not employed because they are superior and project participants are inferior. They are employed because they can provide a truly unbiased, diverse, independent, and detached evaluation of the project. They can be detached because they have not been party to the project decisions. They can be independent and unbiased because they have no part in the internal politics and are not subject to organizational impacts arising out of their professional views.

A concern of IPR teams is to protect their reputation and professional image through defensible reviews. Construction, rather than destruction, should be their motto. Teamwork and selling of their ideas should be their modus operandi.

Recognize Achievement, Not Just Poor Performance. By their very nature, IPRs tend to focus on corrective actions and improvement opportunities while neglecting the many positive project and participant achievements. Project participants, like IPR teams, are human and appreciate recognition of their achievements. As a good crystal grows from a strong nucleus, improvement opportunities also can be more effectively built on past positive achievements.

Listen and Learn, Then Talk. The style of the IPR team has a major impact on its success. Superior, belligerent, and accusatory attitudes from an IPR team put the project participants in a defensive, non-cooperative posture—a sure key to ineffective effort.

The IPR teams have to learn in a few weeks what the project participants have lived through in the project during several months or years. The IPR can add the most value if the teams listen to and learn from the project participants about past occurrences. Discussions with project participants in an open, inquisitive, and knowledge-seeking manner tend to open up information which may not be readily obvious from the written material.

Unfortunately, IPR teams often have preconceived notions and pet theories which they tend to propagate during interactions with project participants. Further, the IPR teams often tend to have a strong need to preach, a sure “put off” during discussions.

The real success of IPRs is derived when teams make an effort to digest facts and intently listen to the views and experience of participants. It is an essential quality of an IPR team to be able to draw out the project participants to talk and share information. Only humility, openness, and professionalism can achieve this desired frankness from the project team.
If IPR teams talk, preach, or give out preconceived notions before they listen and learn, the project participants could be discouraged from sharing valuable project experiences and information. Any apparent or actual negative criticism on the part of the IPR teams could put the project participants on the defensive. Above all, a superior posture from an IPR team would shut off the project participants completely.

By its very nature, IPR duration is short. It should be used to listen and learn and interchange views. The assessment of the project should be reserved to the initial feedback and final report stage.

Complainers, Detractors, and Know-It-Alls. Just like the real world, projects are full of diverse protagonists. Only the skill of the IPR team can fully utilize these talents to the advantage of the project.

Complainers often use IPRs to vent their personal frustrations. They also tend to exaggerate. By channeling the discussions with complainers, an IPR team often can successfully delineate fact from fiction and objectivity from subjectivity.

Detractors tend to divert the IPR teams’ attention from themselves to others. Only tenacity by the IPR team can bring them back to the central theme of discussions.

All projects have know-it-alls, the ones who know everything. In these cases, the IPR team, through adept discussions, must try to derive maximum information from them while cutting off useless dialogue.

Build a Team, Don’t Destroy It. Expert IPR teams often use the reviews to foster team spirit among project participants. Misunderstandings among project participants are often clarified. The participants, particularly at higher levels, may be unequivocally told that internal politics are destroying the fabric of teamwork.

Consensus—Prelude to Success. The best way to implement a project improvement opportunity is to sell the idea at the grassroots level. Experienced and successful IPR teams sell their ideas to their counterparts in project teams and to participants and make them appear the result of joint efforts. This strategy affords wider acceptance and implementation of IPR recommendations.

Never Say “I Told You So.” On major projects, the same IPR teams are often asked to carry out various IPRs throughout the life of the project. One thing the teams should desist from saying is “I told you so in the previous IPR report.” It is likely that the circumstances did not permit full implementation of the previous report. There may also have been errors of omission and commission. However, each IPR is a new chapter for seeking new opportunities for improvement, not for criticizing past lapses.

Conclusion
In the future, more and more major industrial projects seeking improvement opportunities will resort to Independent Project Reviews for a second, unbiased assessment of their performance. In addition to the technical and professional abilities of the IPR teams, their human relations skills play an important role in performing successful reviews. The success of the IPRs also depends on the frankness and receptiveness of sponsors, project teams, and participants. All should view the Independent Project Review as a team effort to achieve the common objective of project performance improvement. If IPR teams imagine themselves in the roles of sponsors, project teams and participants, they will become sensitive to others’ anxieties and thus steer the IPR away from destructive criticism and towards constructive performance improvement.

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