

A Technical Paper on Leading with Responsibility: Exploring the Importance of Soft Skills in a Project Team

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Leveraging project management for excellence, growth and transformation



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1.1 Abstract

This paper explores the importance of leadership as a soft skill among project managers and outlines techniques for leadership development.

The paper incorporates case studies to highlight the importance of leadership and to evolve tools to develop it. The focus is on situational leadership and implementing coaching and mentoring systems for effective teams.

The hard skills related to project management are relatively easy to acquire with the PMI's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) being a comprehensive resource in this regard. However, soft skills cannot be as easily learnt from books. Leadership is particularly tricky since often project managers have responsibility without authority. Therefore, building authority through appropriate leadership is critical for success. Otherwise, the nine PM knowledge areas and the five PM process groups may merely remain a theoretical guideline.

The paper explores ways to create understanding of leadership as a concept among managers and identifies avenues to practise the skills. Projects function within the larger context of an organization with varying business environmental and social influences. Hence, some propositions presented in the paper may have to be adapted to fit into the cultural context of the project.

Through effective coaching and mentoring, situational leadership provides individuals a chance at self-actualization. It helps a professional understand the human facet of business and appreciate the fact that processes and systems are critical for success, but they can be used only when the softer side of teams is touched – willingness and motivation to work will come only through right leadership.

1.2 Keywords

Leadership, coaching, mentoring

1.3 Introduction

The UK Association of Project Management (APM) defines a project as “a unique transient endeavour undertaken to achieve a desired outcome.” From this definition, we may derive that:

- ✦ A project has a specified outcome.
- ✦ A project involves various tasks directed towards achieving the specified outcome.
- ✦ Each task should ideally be carried out by someone with suitable skills.
- ✦ A project is self-contained.

Usually, the constraints that drive a project, known as the ‘project triangle’ include time, cost and quality (or specification). However, since ultimately it is the human resources that produce the results, modern practitioners place people at the centre of the triangle.



Figure 1 – Project Triangle

As Figure 1 indicates, while resources in the form of time, budgets and technical knowledge may be provided, they cannot produce results on their own. It is the people factor that integrates the other resources and makes them productive. Therefore, people management is crucial to the success of a project.

1.4 Project Leadership

What distinguishes a project from a regular organizational activity is that a project is result-oriented. It is usually not meant to replace horizontal activities. As a result, a lot of project teams draw members from horizontal teams, while the members may continue to work on the horizontal teams as well. In such a scenario, it is possible that a project manager may be outranked by a member of his project team. Even otherwise, the challenge of integrating the thought processes, objectives and styles of working of team members from various backgrounds is critical. It is here that leadership comes to the forefront.

To a great degree, the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) equips a project manager with the processes, tools and techniques to manage a project. However, the documents are merely a guide and the success of a project depends on how a manager uses them effectively. Similarly, other tools such as the Unified Software Development Process or Critical Chain Project Management can come to aid provided the 'softer' or human aspects of the project are taken care of. Even if a project is provided with all the appropriate resources, consider the following scenarios:

- ◆ Inability of the project manager to explain and justify the scope of the project to the team members
- ◆ Lack of clarity in communication mechanisms within the project team
- ◆ Lack of engagement of team members
- ◆ Absolute focus on the process element of the project while ignoring the human (emotional) element

In all these cases, it is possible that despite the presence of all non-human resources, the project may still fail or not deliver well enough simply because the project leader's inability to motivate and communicate with his/her team. Organizations as well as history are replete with cases where teams have succeeded in spite of lack of resources, simply because the leader could drive the team well. Here is an example:



1.5 Case Study

Polar explorer Ernest Shackleton, recognized as a great leader of the 20th century, imparted a strong vision to the crew of HMS Endeavour when they were marooned on the ice in an Antarctic winter. The 'project' was to get the team home safely without any loss of life. Throughout their epic voyage, first across ice and then rough, cold seas, Shackleton constantly reminded them of their aim by providing examples of selflessness, including discarding his gold watch and other personal possessions to save weight. Despite his single-minded determination, he also appreciated the vital importance of morale in maintaining performance: possessions saved included a crew member's banjo. Despite suffering the most severe hardships for several months, the entire party managed to return safely to civilisation.

1.6 Optimising Human Resources

There are a number of psychometric tools available to measure team fit. A lot of organizations use customised profiling models. A very popular tool used in this regard is the Belbin model created by Dr. Meredith Belbin who, studied team-work for many years. He observed that people in teams tend to assume different "team roles". He defined a team role as "a tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way" and named nine such team roles classified under three types of orientation, that underlie team success:

1.7 Action oriented:


- ◆ Shapers (SH) - who challenge the team to improve
- ◆ Implementer (IMP) - who get things done
- ◆ Completer-Finisher (CF) - who see that projects are completed thoroughly

1.7.1 People oriented:

- ◆ Coordinator (CO) - who take on the traditional team-leader role and have also been referred to as the chairmen
- ◆ Team Worker (TW) - who provide support and make sure that people within the team are working together effectively
- ◆ Resource Investigator (RI) - who are innovative and curious

1.7.2 Thought oriented:

- ◆ Plant (PL) - who come up with new ideas and approaches
- ◆ Monitor-Evaluator (ME) - who are best at analyzing and evaluating ideas that other people (often Plants) come up with
- ◆ Specialist (SP) - who have specialized knowledge that is needed to get the job done



A project manager would do well to avail of a good profiling tool and understand the team well. This paves the way for utilising the team's strengths by taking cognizance of natural inclinations and aptitudes.

1.7.3 Leading from the Middle

Traditionally, leaders are conditioned to lead from the front. However, in a project context, it may sometimes help to lead from the middle. Leading from the front is helpful in the initial stages of a project where the team needs guidance and direction. However, once there is clarity of roles, it is important to align them with the values, motivations and beliefs of the team members.

Therefore, there are three distinct agendas that Marlier and Parker recommend in their book 'Engaging Leadership – Three Agendas for Sustaining Achievement':

- ◆ *Intellectual Agenda:* Invite the team to a discussion about your project's aims, based in transparency and a shared understanding of roles and goals.
- ◆ *Behavioural agenda:* The leader's behaviour reveals his/her values and beliefs. The leader has to be a role model for the team by listening actively in discussions, offering support and constructive challenge.
- ◆ *Emotional agenda:* A strong sense of purpose is acquired as much by achieving the right frame of mind as by any logical means of persuasion. The leader needs to challenge the team to create the passion necessary to 'go for it'.

As a project manager, it is important to remember that his/her role is about managing people and not tasks. Since projects are governed by processes, a lot of managers slip into issuing task directives rather than facilitating it through their team members. The situational leadership model by Hersey and Blanchard is pertinent in such a scenario. The model describes four leadership styles known as:

- ◆ *Telling:* A person new to a task will need close guidance.
- ◆ *Coaching:* As their expertise increases, team members will increasingly be able to give inputs into how things can be done.
- ◆ *Supporting:* Once the team members are proficient in their role, decision-making becomes a joint task between the manager and the member.
- ◆ *Delegating:* A fully competent and confident team member can be given control of their job; the leader may offer support and advice when required.

Thus, a project manager may choose to adopt a style that is relevant to the nature and stage of the project as well as the capability of the people in the team. This would produce far better results rather than sticking to a rigid style that may fail to motivate team members who do not need close supervision or who may outrank the manager in the organizational hierarchy.



1.8 Coaching and Mentoring

In a general organizational context, coaching and mentoring systems are used largely for maximizing knowledge transfer, increasing skill levels and succession planning. In a project context, these concepts are important for two reasons:

- ◆ improving productivity by raising the motivation of the project team
- ◆ developing skills that can serve the organization way beyond the scope of project

Coaching consists of talking through issues and helping people to deal with them using their own (often hidden strengths). The emphasis is on listening and asking relevant questions rather than dispensing advice. On the other hand, mentoring involves offering advice based on one's own experience.

Let us further differentiate between coaching and mentoring and understand the scenarios in which they can be used.

1.8.1 Coaching


Coaching can be defined as the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another person. The key word is 'facilitating'. The main assumption is that the person being coached has the ability to actually think things through themselves and the coach brings out latent potential.

Coaching is initiated and driven by the manager and is a finite activity. A project leader, in order to be an effective coach, should:

- ◆ Believe in human potential
- ◆ Focus on learning
- ◆ Let those coached do the work
- ◆ Listen actively
- ◆ Set a performance management system or clarify the project role and goal as a support for the coaching activity

The advantages of coaching during a project are:

- ◆ It lends flexibility.
- ◆ There is increased sense of responsibility.
- ◆ The manager assumes ability on the part of those being coached, thus raising motivation.
- ◆ There is increase in the available choices of resources.
- ◆ It facilitates continuous improvement.



After the focus for the coaching activity has been decided by the leader and the team member the coaching model can be framed. The GROW model gives a useful framework on which to hang the process components. It is divided into sections that can be described as follows:

- ✦ *Goal* - set the goal for the coaching session
- ✦ *Reality* - look at the current and proposed situation in a realistic manner.
- ✦ *Options* - examine what it is possible for the member being coached to do
- ✦ *Wrap-up* - ensure that there is clarity around the expectations, actions to be taken, support required and commitment from both parties

1.8.2 Mentoring

Mentoring is a strategic approach to developing an employee (the mentoree) by pairing them with a more experienced employee (the mentor) who will teach, counsel, sponsor and encourage them. There are two main forms of mentoring:

1.8.2.1 Informal Mentoring


This form of mentoring has the following characteristics:

- ✦ Goals are unspecified
- ✦ Outcomes are unknown
- ✦ Access is limited and may exclude
- ✦ Mentors / Mentorees self select
- ✦ Mentoring lasts a long time
- ✦ No training / support is given
- ✦ Organization benefits indirectly if at all

1.8.2.2 Formal Mentoring

This form of mentoring has the following characteristics:

- ✦ Goals are established
- ✦ Outcomes are measured
- ✦ Access open to all who qualify
- ✦ Mentors / Mentorees are paired
- ✦ Training and support is provided
- ✦ Mentoring time is limited
- ✦ Organization benefits directly



In case of a project, a mentoring process is more likely to be informal given the finite nature of a project. Of course, it may be anchored on the larger, more formal mentoring system of the organization, if it exists. Even otherwise, a project leader can evolve a mentoring system within his/her team.

In order to be a good mentor, a leader must have:

- ◆ Respect within the organization/project
- ◆ High level of relevant experience
- ◆ Ability to get on with people
- ◆ Excellent communication skills
- ◆ Humility to learn

A mentoring system can bring the following benefits to a project:

- ◆ Linkage between competency development and strategic project needs
- ◆ Ensures that skills are developed
- ◆ Involves experts in the process
- ◆ Creates and promotes learning and diverse culture in the team

1.9 Conclusion

Very often, owing to pressing business needs, projects tend to become highly task oriented and managers ignore the people and culture issues altogether. This greatly increases the risk of failure of the project because the manager avoids or suppresses the people issues that may blow up at a critical stage.

It is important to plan the execution of a project well. However, manager expect that they will be able to identify, plan for an influence all the variables and players in advance, which is not always possible in a dynamic business environment. A starting point for greater success is shedding the blueprint model that has implicitly driven executive behaviour in the management of major projects.

Project leaders should aim to create an ongoing process of learning and discovery, challenging people to produce results, in the process unleashing the organization's collective knowledge and creativity in pursuit of discovery and achievement. This is possible only when the people factor is acknowledged and worked upon. Instead of simply managing tasks, if project managers are able to institute effective people processes within a project, they will be leaders in the true sense.

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1.11 Author's Profile



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