



The Leadership Lever

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Management alone isn't enough for your organization's success—or, for that matter, your success. In today's project-based organization, management is everywhere. Yet projects continue to fail and organizations miss their goals. Management is everywhere, while leadership is all too often nowhere.

So how can you bring leadership to bear on your project's success? Through the simple metaphor of the lever. Archimedes once said, "Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world." This image relates your efforts to their multiplying effect on team behavior. Visualizing this metaphor as you address project issues can bring forth practical solutions based on proven leadership concepts. Let's start with the management lever.

The Management Lever

The management lever has been applied since antiquity and fine-tuned over the course of the industrial and information revolutions. Its current instantiation typically comprises four elements (see Figure 1):

- a *defined process* dictates the tasks each person on the manager's

team must follow (this element has the most leverage);

- a *monitor-and-control function* lets the manager know the current status of task completion and indicates actions to take to keep the project on track;
- a *reward system*—also known as the "carrot and stick" approach—lets managers exploit the organization's reward system; and
- the *organization's value system* guides team members toward behaviors deemed important to project success. Members of the organization must adopt and exemplify these values to receive the "carrot" and avoid the "stick."

These approaches can help align efforts with a common purpose and generate positive results, but they by no means guarantee project success or team harmony.

For example, adopting a waterfall process when requirements continue to change isn't uncommon. When the manager (or organization) selects the wrong process, the manager's job becomes an effort in futility, with the management lever providing little amplification of the manager's efforts.

While it's important to monitor a project's progress, organizations often overlook the cost of this activity (see Figure 2a). This cost comprises monitoring tools (typically software and associated training), employee time spent compiling the resulting status reports, and decreased morale for employees who feel this data goes unused.

Furthermore, although the deficiencies of the carrot-and-stick mentality have been extensively researched in the business and psychological literature (see Daniela Pink's *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*), organizations rarely deviate from this approach. This mind-set can have significant unintended consequences (see Figure 2b).

Finally, when employees feel the company values come from an ad agency instead of the heart, the values are no longer an asset. Instead, they became an obstacle that the project manager must overcome.

In these situations, management must be held accountable and appropriate solutions sought. However, the savvy project manager will realize that leadership has the greater leverage and will

apply leadership concepts to align team members' behavior when deficiencies in the management lever occur.

The Leadership Lever

The leadership lever's four elements are the leader's vision, values, ability to handle mistakes, and ability to influence others.

Vision

This is the element with the greatest leverage. A clear vision shows people how their actions relate to an achievable future state that benefits themselves and those they care about. Aspiring leaders often underestimate the need to articulate a vision. They incorrectly assume that the clear future state in their imagination is shared by the team or organization. This is rarely the case.

A clear vision statement eliminates noise in a project or organization's common communication channels. It's like placing a horseshoe magnet under a sheet of paper containing iron filings—the magnet aligns the random filings in a single direction. Vision statements that generate alignment coherently address the five W's: who, what, when, where, and why. This alignment reduces needless meetings, misleading emails, and

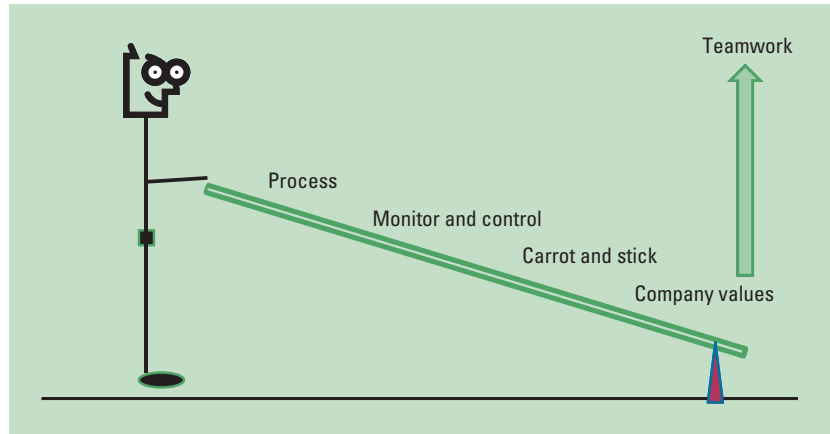


Figure 1. The management lever. Leveraging the four main management components to meet project commitments.

hallway debates—in short, unproductive confusion.

Values

Values are essential, given the propensity of humans to commit to specific people in addition to a conceptual vision of the future. In fact, if followers have committed to a leader in the past and trust that leader, they will give him or her the benefit of the doubt with regards to the vision.

Trust is based on past experience and knowing a person's values, so leaders must express their values in the workplace. On the leadership lever, the leader's values are significantly more important than the company's values. Recall a leader from your past who positively

influenced your career. You can probably remember his or her core values—perhaps teamwork, family, achievement, or humility—but can you also recall the company values of the organization in which you both worked? Unlikely.

Handling Mistakes

Leaders understand that mistakes will happen. Processes aren't perfect, the monitor-and-control function is rarely optimized in terms of costs and benefits, and reward systems have unintended consequences. However, when mistakes are analyzed solely in the realm of the management lever, the likely outcome is more process, more monitoring, sweeter carrots, and sharper sticks.

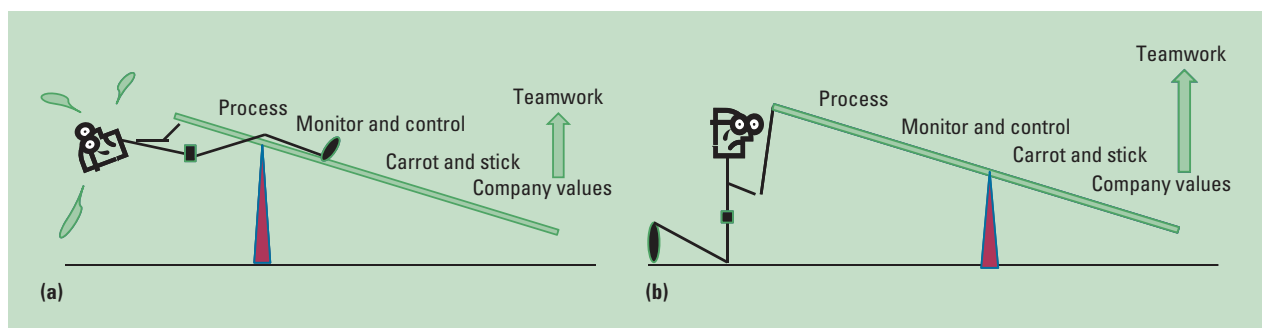


Figure 2. Unintended consequences of the management lever. (a) Overusing the monitor-and-control element: status meetings are essential, but meeting every day at lunch has diminishing returns. (b) Using the carrot-and-stick approach to motivate employees often backfires: pay-for-performance sounds good until you can't motivate the 50 percent of team members now labeled "below average."

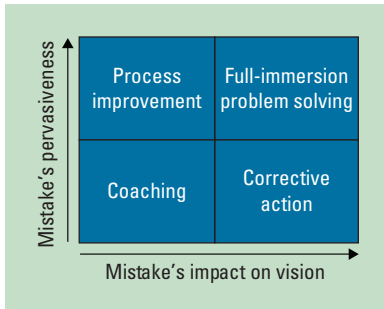


Figure 3. Categorizing mistakes. This categorization captures the pervasiveness of the mistakes, along with a logical framework for dealing with them.

The leader must break this cycle by protecting the most important element of the leadership lever—his or her vision. The leader treats mistakes on the basis of their impact on the vision. Figure 3 shows a straightforward categorization of mistakes in this regard. The figure also captures the pervasiveness of the mistakes, along with a logical framework for dealing with them.

The most demanding situation appears in the upper right quadrant. Here a pervasive set of mistakes has jeopardized the leader's vision. The leader must be fully immersed in determining how to move forward and he or she must put all options on the table: a new process, schedule, or contract, new people, and even a new vision statement. The leader's ability to engage the team's creative talents, coupled with an ability to negotiate new agreements with stakeholders, are formidable talents in this arena.

Influencing Skills

The leadership lever's last component is perhaps the most obvious. By definition, a leader has followers; thus, the ability to influence these followers is an inherent leadership component. This ability rests on sound communication skills—written, verbal, and

nonverbal (body language). These skills must be strategically applied when influencing others. Standard influencing strategies include active listening, reciprocity, logic, networking, and assertiveness.

Active listening, based on the premise that you must seek to understand before being understood, is an example of instantiating a leader's inner value of empathy into the workplace. Reciprocity is based on human beings' natural inclination to return favors. A smart leader in a room with 20 people sees 20 opportunities to help—not 20 opportunities to be helped.

Logic relies on information, facts, and deductive reasoning. It's most useful when addressing planning, preparation, and sequential events—especially when both parties share the same domain expertise. However, cold hard facts often aren't enough. Recent research ties emotion and feelings to the human decision-making process. When applying logic, the leader should first understand the other party's emotional state.

Networking relies on established alliances with key organizational stakeholders. However, the network must be in place before the need for the outcome emerges. If not, the impression of manipulating the system will arise. Therefore, the leader must invest personal energy in an ongoing professional network.

Assertiveness relies on a strong, opinionated personality and attendant body language. It works best on people who shy away from confrontation or realize the soundness of the leader's desired outcome. However, it generally makes the other person feel weak and should be used sparingly. When used, the leader must follow up with those who received

the brunt of his or her demand. This lets the leader privately reiterate the task's importance, thus providing rationale for leader's passionate position, and request essential support, thereby providing a feeling of strength for the follower.

Traits to Live By

As you apply these concepts, several leadership traits emerge, which I highlight below against the backdrop of related management traits (in italics).

Improvise

Management by definition requires you to *supervise*. However, leaders are aware that processes can be deficient and that serious mistakes can occur. They are willing to improvise when all else has failed and their vision is still jeopardized.

Challenge Assumptions

Most formal processes require managers to *document assumptions*. Good leaders, however, are aware of the limitations of the management lever and will challenge assumptions to ensure that their vision is given the greatest probability of success.

Collaborate

Managers learn to *negotiate* for resources, funding, and schedule as a matter of course. When their vision is at risk, leaders learn to collaborate.

Be Well Read

Managers are *well versed* in the details and nuances of the processes for which they're responsible. Leaders, however, are well read. They read widely to ensure their vision makes sense in the broader context of the business, technical, social, or political world in which it will be instantiated.

Take Action

Business decisions require thorough *analysis*. Rarely is every contingency understood in time to make the decisions that support the “when” of the five W’s vision statement. So, leaders must be willing to take action.

Fire When Needed

Hiring in modern organizations is a process driven by a history of legal litigation. The manager is expected to be aware of all legal concerns and execute the company’s hiring process. The leader, however, won’t tolerate personnel decisions that jeopardize his or her vision. Typically, it’s the leader who will fire.

Build Culture

Managers are expected to *support culture*—that is, the latest set of company values. In fact, they’re the front line in promulgating these values. Consider any company’s “diversity” initiative as a case in point.

Leaders express their own values and are truly interested in the values of others. Within their projects and programs, leaders build culture based on these values.

Be an Agent of Change

Processes and requirements change during any project’s life cycle. A critical management function is to track the status of all changes from “proposed” to “implemented,” and good managers embrace the seriousness of this *change control* task. The leader, however, realizes that the organizational status quo isn’t typically optimized to support his or her vision and is willing to be a change agent.

Learn from Mistakes

Manages strive to make their processes mistake-proof and use the quality control function to track

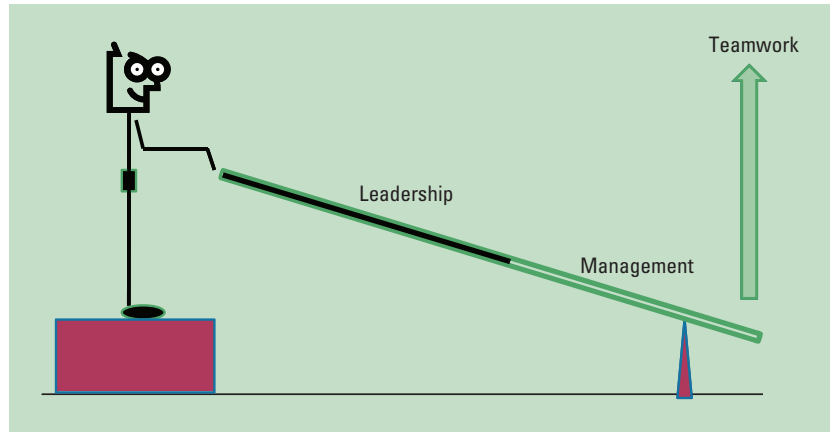



Figure 4. The leadership lever. Leadership extends the management lever to better align the team with project goals.

and categorize mistakes that do occur. A management measure of success is the number and severity of mistakes, so the manager’s goal is to *make no mistakes*. The leader’s measure of success, however, is the amount learned from mistakes.

Management is a lever comprising process, a monitor-and-control system, an organizational reward system, and company values. Leadership is an extension of this lever aimed at moving people’s behavior in a common direction aligned with project goals (see Figure 4). Leaders who embrace this conceptual lever provide a compelling vision for the work at

hand, express their core values and grasp the values of others, protect their vision from their mistakes and the mistakes of others, and effectively influence stakeholders as required. 

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