

Redefining Project Management;
People truly are a project manager's most valuable asset. Those who
understand this principle find success. © 2009 by Dr. Denis Petersen, PMP®

Introduction

The title “project manager” is in many instances a misnomer. People hear the title and immediately begin thinking of schedules and budgets. However, truly successful project managers understand that tools do not produce success. People produce success.

People are a project manager's most valuable asset. Without good people, tools and processes are left lifeless, inanimate and unproductive. Successful project managers also understand that people need leadership; they cannot be managed like a project schedule or budget. Thus, project leader or project coach may be titles that better describe what project managers must be to produce success on projects.

The term people, as used above, refers to executives, project sponsors, project team members, customers and other stakeholders who have a vested interest in the outcome of a project. Many projects are truly organization-wide efforts. The impacts of successful or failed projects can touch stakeholders positively or negatively throughout an entire organization or enterprise. This simple fact demands that project managers provide effective leadership for stakeholders (across, up and down the management chain) throughout the lifecycle of a project.

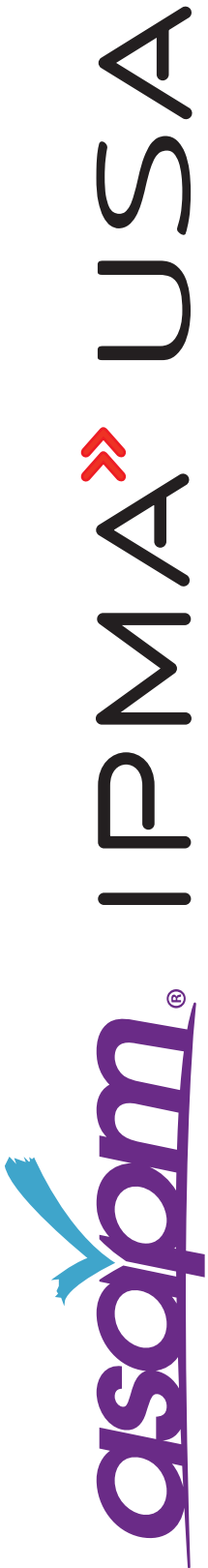
Management vs. Leadership

So, how is project leadership different from project management? Stephen R. Covey, author of “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” teaches the important principle of managing things and leading people. This concept definitely applies in a project management setting. Project scope statements, schedules, budgets, materials, equipment and other similar tools and resources are things that must be managed. Project stakeholders are people that must be led. Managing tools and resources is the foundation of good bricks-and-mortar project management. Working well with people, providing vision, establishing elevating goals, motivating stakeholders, causing people to stretch and communicating effectively are all at the heart of successful project leadership.

John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and author of “The Leadership Factor,” says strong management without leadership may become static and bureaucratic. In accordance with these thoughts, successful project management requires a good mix of both leadership and management to avoid bureaucracy or volatility during the project lifecycle. Project managers should be the personification of both of these skill sets.

However, too often project managers forget the importance of people and fall back on the management skills that are easier to implement. They are then left to grind through project details without truly having a vision of what it takes to produce success. Truly successful project managers remember the importance of people in producing success; and, they lean more towards the leadership end of the spectrum.

The road toward effective leadership and project success may seem more difficult than managing things. After all, things don't talk back to you or have a bad day! You don't have to communicate with things, deal with their personal problems or trust they will do their job. Tools, materials and equipment normally do what they are supposed to do. People, on the other hand, are free to think and act for themselves. This is both the difficulty and beauty of working with people and providing good leadership. Good leaders who can help people channel their thoughts and actions toward producing project success are truly on the “road less traveled.” These are the project managers who find incredible fulfillment while leading their team through the project lifecycle.



So how does a project manager provide good leadership? As leaders, project managers must act much like coaches of athletic teams. Coaches always have the goal of getting the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time. To do this, good coaches carefully look for the best available athletes and do all they can to train them to improve their natural, or previously learned, abilities. They then provide appropriate vision and direction and empower them to perform on the field. In a similar manner, project managers must build the team, establish vision and direction and then empower the team to produce success.

Building the Team

Building a team involves assembling team members, making appropriate assignments, improving individual abilities, and helping people work together in a cohesive manner.

Assembling team members is the process of bringing together the right people with the right skill sets and abilities to accomplish project goals and requirements. Executives should allow project managers to have a say in how the team is assembled. When this is possible, project managers should take the opportunity to bring in the best talent available and weave them into the framework of the project team. If it is not possible, project managers should do the best they can with what they've got and ensure everyone understands their roles and responsibilities.

Once the team is assembled, project managers must make very specific assignments to place team members in the right place at the right time. Great project managers orchestrate their teams to ensure the abilities, assignments and availability of team members match up with the tasks at hand. Team members who understand and accept their roles and assignments produce at a higher level than those left without direction.

While assembly and assignment are important in getting the team moving, fostering individual improvement and team cohesion throughout the project are critical steps in keeping it moving. Project managers must provide opportunities for individual team members to grow mentally, physically, socially and emotionally to reach peak performance in their project roles. Individuals become much more valuable to the team as they improve their abilities to perform.

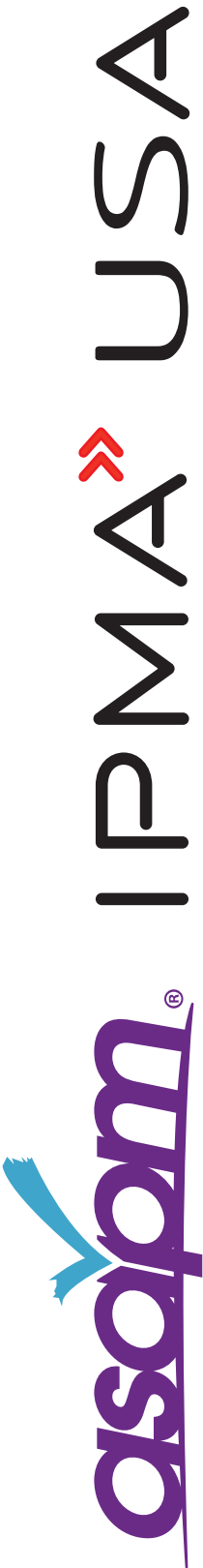
In concert with this, project managers must help these individuals work together in a cohesive manner. The simplest methods of doing this involve making every gathering a team-building event. Many times people think they must have a large, expensive off-site meeting to create team cohesion. However, the best methods are usually much simpler than this. Project-planning sessions, project meetings and team communication opportunities all have the potential of breaking down barriers and building cohesion if treated as team-building exercises. Project managers must look for ways to lead their team into these opportunities.

Establishing Vision and Direction

Vision is the ability to see or imagine the future we desire to create. A very wise king once said, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." This is certainly true for projects. Projects perish without vision and direction. Establishing vision and direction provides the team proper alignment. It also provides them a purpose to exist as a team and allows them to work more effectively toward project goals and outcomes.

Creating a project vision is a fundamental leadership and team alignment skill. Project managers can establish vision in three simple steps: First, they must allow the team to help create the vision; second, they must achieve team buy-in; and finally, they must provide appropriate motivation to keep team members focused on the vision.

The coaching analogy is also important here. A coach can lead the team through vision creation. A coach can also encourage and motivate the team to achieve great things on the field.



However, the coach cannot play the game for the players. The coach's job is to climb above the fray, look over the horizon and provide an assurance the team is headed in the right direction to achieve the vision. The team's job is to align themselves with the vision and perform to the best of their abilities. Great project managers lead like a coach, provide vision and direction, and motivate team members to achieve the vision.

Empowering the Team

A great leader once said, "The best way to produce success on a project is to provide vision and direction and then get out of the way!" Empowerment is the embodiment of getting out of the way. Too many project managers find themselves trying to play the game for their players, rather than truly trying to lead them. Great project managers pull themselves out of the entangling weeds, trust their people, keep them focused on the vision and empower them to perform.

It is truly amazing what can happen on a project when managers become leaders and empower their teams to perform. General Colin Powell once said in a leadership presentation in Chicago, "The vast majority of the workforce possesses far more capability, creativity, talent, initiative and resourcefulness than their present job allows." Wise project managers do not squelch creativity and talent by micro-managing their people. They tap into this power and resourcefulness to help a project achieve success.

Remember

While this article is not meant to change the title of project manager to project leader or project coach, it is meant to focus professionals on what truly produces project success. People are truly a project manager's most valuable asset. Those who understand this principle find success as they focus more on people and lead them by building the team, establishing vision and direction, and empowering the team.

About the Author

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Credit

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