

## Leadership Essentials For PMPs - Part 1 of 3

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### Introduction

The journey to project management excellence continues beyond earning a Project Management Professional (PMP) to include practicing project leadership. However, even highly skilled PMPs find success limited until they can sift through the bewildering amount of leadership information and identify actions essential for them at this point in their careers.

This is a how-to series of articles. The articles describe how PMP-level project managers can take specific leadership actions that will contribute to project success. The articles define project leadership, draw from the large body of PMI-sponsored and related project leadership research, describe the leadership role in high performance teams, give emphasis to sources of power for project leaders, and provide methods for project leaders to amplify their power. A list of specific project leader actions is included. A central theme is that PMP-level project managers can become successful project leaders by taking the actions identified.

Part one of this three-part series examines the project leadership situation, part two will examine related project leadership work, and part three will examine high performance project teams.

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### The Problem

A recently published book by Ron Taylor titled *Leadership: Stories, Lessons and Uncommon Sense* begins with a sentence that states, "There are a lot of footprints in the snow when it comes to advice on leadership." Indeed, there is a bewildering amount of potential leadership advice in written form available. This point can be illustrated by examining the book section found on Amazon.com; approximately sixty-eight thousand books are identified in response to the search term "leadership." And, not all of the leadership advice is consistent; it certainly is not tailored to the needs of the project manager who recently earned his/her PMP. Without a doubt, the footprints in the snow are not all headed in the same direction. So, what is a PMP who is looking to advance to higher levels of success to do? Which leadership advice is most appropriate at this point in the PMP's career?

This dilemma is illustrated in the story about George, who is using effective project management practices, has noted that something appears to be missing. What is George to do? Although he seems to have a solid base of project management skills, he also faces some challenges leading his project team. Will his focus on the core knowledge areas contained in *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) – Fourth Edition* that got him this far, get him much further? Will he respond adequately to his emerging awareness of the importance of leadership in the success of his projects? Will George be distracted by the huge number of the footprints in the snow?

George, a project manager with a few years experience, recently earned a PMP. He is finding his assignment as the project manager for an important new project both exhilarating and frustrating.

The visibility and status associated with his new assignment represent a big change compared to the relatively obscurity of his previous assignments. Consequently, George has become highly committed to insuring that nothing gets in the way of the success of his new project. Indeed, the established methods, processes, and practices from the *PMBOK Guide* that George is following do seem to be working. The project, which is well underway already, is meeting the triple constraint of cost, schedule, and scope.

However, the members of George's project team do not seem to share his level of commitment. Some team members require an inordinate amount of prodding by George to complete their assigned tasks. And, none of the team members voluntarily stepped forward recently to help address the impact of the sudden departure of a couple of the other team members.

## The Context

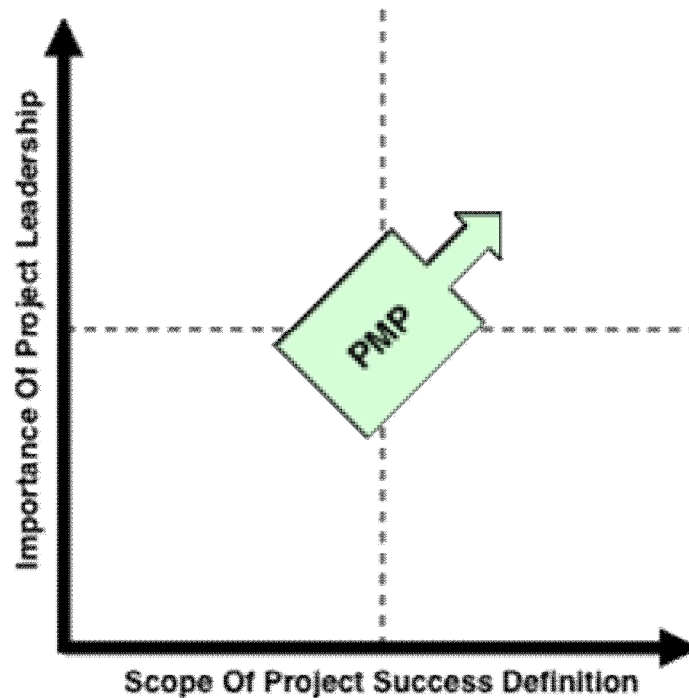
Jeffery Pinto, who has studied and written about project leadership for many years, provides us with a comprehensive picture of the role that leadership plays in project management. In his book titled *Leadership Skills for Project Managers* published by PMI he writes that “the best scheduling techniques, risk management, scope development, project control, and resource provisions will not ensure project success in the face of poor project leadership.

The context for project leadership in this paper is being addressed in the context of project success. Indeed, the underlying principle is that project leadership by the project manager is necessary for project success.

This dependence raises the interesting question about the relationship between project leadership and project success. Just how important is project leadership to project success? The answer depends on how project success is defined. Research by Turner and Muler published by Project Management Institute titled *Choosing Appropriate Project Managers* indicates “complexity appears to be the most distinguishing factor when it comes to different competencies for different project types.”

Consider a project to write a report with a success definition focused on getting the report completed on time. Now consider a project to send a manned rocket into outer space with a success definition, as established by President George Bush when speaking to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 2004, to “lift our national spirit.”

These two entirely different examples of the definition of project success illustrate a broad range in project complexity. They also illustrate a broad range in the need for project leadership as shown in graphical illustration. The project manager responsible for lifting national spirit will find that project leadership will be much more important in achieving project success than will the project manager for the completion of a written report.



The context for the treatment of project leadership in this article series falls in the continuum between the extremes of these two examples. The context for the treatment of project leadership in this article series is focused on the project manager who is comfortable with much of the knowledge represented by the *PMBOK Guide* and who understands that integrating leadership skills into the application of that knowledge is essential for success on projects with expanding definitions of success.

## A Project Leadership Definition

Definitions of leadership are plentiful. Great minds and famous authors have enlightened and amused us for millennia with their characterizations of leadership. Thanks to Morrell and Capparell, in their well-researched book titled *Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons From the Great Antarctic Explorer*, we discover a compelling project leadership definition from history that took place a century ago.

In 1914 Ernest Shackleton and his men survived the wreck of their ship, "Endurance," which was crushed in the Antarctic ice, and for the next two years, they were stranded 1,200 miles from civilization with no means of communication and no hope of rescue. When the ice began to break up, Shackleton set out to save them all, undertaking a heroic 800-mile trip across the frigid South Atlantic in little more than a rowboat. Unlike other polar expeditions, every man survived, not only in good health, but also in good spirits, all due to Shackleton's leadership. Here then, we have a highly dramatic example of a classic failure of a project when measured by the "triple constraint" (completion of the project on time, within budget, and at an acceptable level of quality).



The expedition never even reached Antarctica, much less crossed it, as had been its purpose; the trip had been scheduled to take months, not years; and losing the entire ship was certainly never a part of the planned costs. Yet in spite of the failure of the project itself, the expedition impressively demonstrates an important quality of a great project manager: project leadership. The journals of the men that Shackleton led on the fateful *Endurance* expedition contained numerous expressions of their inner thoughts and feelings, many of which included the sentiment that it was "the best time of their lives." That's right; in spite of unbelievable hardship the men felt like it was the best time of their lives because of Shackleton's leadership. Business improvement writers and scholars have found Shackleton's story to be a valuable case study applicable to the office environment. In this example we see project leadership being practiced with an eye constantly on the true criterion for project success (in this case, not on reaching the South Pole, but instead on building the foundation for enduring future successes as the purpose of the project shifted).

Thanks to the Shackleton story, we can understand that project leadership is defined as a strong emphasis on the enduring impact on the project team. We can also see that project leadership is defined with a de-emphasis on the specific project deliverables. Stated another way, project leaders take care of the project team who, in turn, take care of the project deliverables.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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**Michael O'Brochta**, who has managed hundreds of projects during the past thirty years, is also an experienced line manager, author, lecturer, trainer and consultant. He holds a master's degree in project management, a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, and is certified as a PMP. As Zozer Inc. President, he is helping organizations raise their level of project management performance. As senior project manager at the Central Intelligence Agency, he led the project management and systems engineering training and certification program to mature practices agency-wide. Mr. O'Brochta's other recent work includes leading the development of standards and courses for the new U.S. Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers. He serves at the PMI corporate level on the Ethics Management Advisory Group and at the chapter level where he built and led the international PMIWDC Chapter-to-Chapter program; he is a graduate of the Leadership Institute Mater Class. Mr. O'Brochta has written and presented papers at every PMI North American Global Congress during the past decade as well as at many international, and regional conferences. Topics that he is currently passionate about include how to get executives to act for project success and great project managers. Since his recent climb of another of the world's seven summits, he has been exploring the relationship between project management and mountain climbing. He can be contacted at [mobrochta@zozerinc.com](mailto:mobrochta@zozerinc.com).