

Project Followership: How Project Team Members Can Contribute to Project Success¹

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INTRODUCTION

By screening the books addressing project management topics, it can be noted that most publications are aimed at project managers and, more generally, the people responsible for coordinating complex and innovative initiatives. In recent years, it was understood that without the support of senior management a project manager has greater difficulty in managing the project. For this reason other publications, targeted to senior management which commissions and sponsors the projects (Archibald and Archibald 2013, West 2010, Englund and Bucero 2006, Love and Love 2000), appeared.

Other publications, instead, recognize the importance of the project team as key player in project environments and they provide hints to the project managers on how to lead, motivate, and manage project teams (DeMarco and Lister 2013, Brown and Hyer 2009, Wong 2007).

It was only very recently that some companies and training providers realized it is necessary to work on the whole team in order to achieve positive results. The trend is moving toward a “widespread” project management where the project leadership is shared among the entire project team. For example, the Agile Project Management approach goes in this direction.

WHY PROJECT MANAGERS ARE NOT ENOUGH

The practice requires that each project be assigned to a project manager. The project manager, or project leader, is the key figure around which the entire project revolves and is the person formally responsible for completing the project in accordance with the objectives set in the project mandate.

The project manager is required to coordinate all the project management activities, from the start-up to closing, by way of planning and control. Project management is therefore inextricably linked to the project manager's ability to coordinate.

Coordinating the project, performing the necessary project management activities, does not mean acting alone. A project, even of limited complexity, necessarily requires a shared effort that goes well beyond the personal contribution provided by the project manager. Working on projects is by nature a transversal activity. The

¹ This paper is mainly based on the Introduction and Chapter 2 of the book: Sampietro, M., Villa, T. Empowering Project Teams. Using Project Followership to Improve Performance. CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

project spans the performing organizations in order to build inter-functional teams based on a variety of professional expertise that differs in terms of specialization, organizational position and culture. This “horizontal cut” across the organization leads to the weakening, and sometimes even the undermining, of hierarchical relationships within the company: in fact it is said that working on projects leads to a flattening of the hierarchy (Gareis 1991).

On the one hand the project manager must act as an integrator (Crawford 1996), thus not the deus ex machina of the project but rather a wise catalyst who solicits contributions from all those who possess knowledge of the project, technology, business and productive processes covered in the project. This is to give the project direction, adjust it as work progresses and keep all the stakeholders informed on a regular basis.

On the other hand, members of the project team also have a responsibility to play an integrating role, avoiding the classic purely reactive attitude. As Pearce and Barkus (2004) pointed out shared leadership is required whenever a corporation deals with very complex and critical challenges which demand a level of skills beyond a single person’s capacity.

This is why the team, if it becomes a key player, must be supported by providing project management skills. However, these skills are not identical to those that a project manager must have: the level of knowledge of project management methodologies and the most appropriate conduct are different.

Each member of a project team is required to provide a twofold contribution: on the one hand a technical and specialist contribution related to their area of expertise, and on the other a managerial contribution in the key stages of the project.

The technical and specialist contribution considers the team member as a point of reference for a particular subject area (knowledge of a product, experience in a specific technology, familiarity with a particular customer environment, mastery of a complex regulatory framework). The managerial contribution instead refers to a set of project management actions for which the expert's contribution is crucial. For instance, think of schedule/cost estimates on certain project activities, the identification of the main project risks, the analysis of variances during the work progress review, the handling of change requests to the initial plan, and capitalizing on the experiences gained from the project.

According to this perspective, the project team member interacts with the project manager and the other members of the team even on managerial aspects, sharing assessments, proposals and actions that help to strengthen the project management system.

We propose to define the managerial contribution of the project team members “project followership”. Project followership means “proactive participation in all managerial aspects of the project work within an individual's visibility horizon” (Sampietro and Villa, 2014).

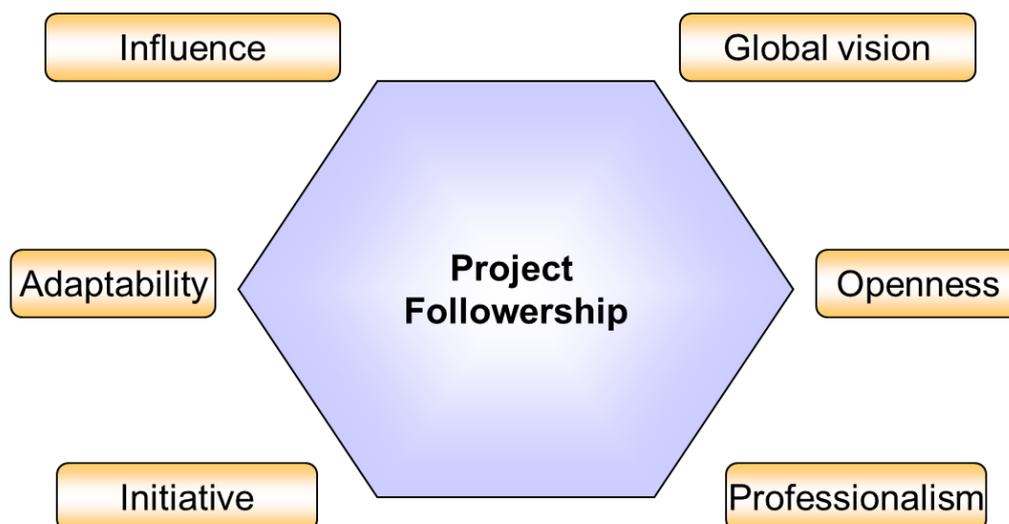
The term “followership” does not have negative connotations (Boccialetti 1995, Chaleff 1995, Kelley 1992) and should not be seen as disparaging for the following reasons:

- a follower's role in supporting the achievement of objectives should not be read as “facilitating the careers of others”, instead it means supporting the group in achieving higher levels of performance, which have a positive impact on all;
- being a good follower does not mean being inferior to the leader; a leader without good collaborators could not be a good leader and, vice versa, collaborators without a good leader to coordinate them would have less chance of success, less space to express themselves, fewer career opportunities and fewer opportunities to engage in motivating activities;
- in our working lives we all play both leader and follower roles; so we should not associate these labels with power but rather conduct that is appropriate in some situations and less so in others.

PROJECT FOLLOWERSHIP: A REFERENCE MODEL

Project Followership is based on several different fields of study (project management, followership, shared leadership, boundary spanning, proactive behaviors). The most relevant resources are reported in the bibliography of this paper.

The following figure presents the distinctive features of Project Followership.



Global Vision is the ability to construct and maintain an overview of the project, broken down into existing situations and situations to work towards. Kelley (1988) maintains that an important quality of followers is to determine one’s own goals

within a large context and to decide what role to take at any given time. Global vision plays an important role in self-motivation. In fact a key to motivating team members is the concept of having them realize how important their function is in a broad sense. Blanchard and Bowles (1998) relate the story of what was considered a meaningless job – dishwashing at a college cafeteria: “Dishwashing in a college cafeteria – it just doesn’t get more important than that...think of the impact those students were going to have on the world. Business leaders, doctors, social scientists, world leaders, researchers. One load of unclean, bacteria-infected dishes could have wiped out a whole class. Look at it in terms of human impact...Students arrived tired, hungry, and likely lonely. You were an important part of the chain that provided joy and nourishment... What a wonderful gift to give another human being...” (p. 33).

Openness is the ability to encourage and sustain a dialectic discussion with other members of the project team and the project manager, paying genuine attention to the viewpoints of others, with a view to achieving a common goal. Openness derives from the fact that nobody has the knowledge to solve all the problems in a project and from the interdependencies that exist among project tasks. In interdependent systems, the behavior of an individual has an impact not only on the effectiveness of that individual, but also on the effectiveness of others, including groups, teams, and the organization as a whole. The potential for an individual to contribute to effectiveness at a team or an organizational level depends on the embeddedness of his or her work role in the social context (Murphy and Jackson 1999). When the activities of a work role are independent of others, then there is a simple link between an individual’s behavior and effectiveness as an employee. When the activities of work role are interdependent with other roles, the link between behavior and effectiveness is more complex. For these reasons exchanging ideas and asking support is fundamental in a project environment. Chaleff (1995) also claims that effective followers are cooperative and collaborative, qualities that are essential to all human progress.

Professionalism is the ability to assume the role and act on the basis of professional, behavioral and ethical models considered to be of reference in an individual's field. Professionalism means:

- Having specialized knowledge on a particular subject matter. This is an essential requirement for a good team member and a typical success factor (Pinto and Slevin 1988): in order to interact “on a par” with the project manager and the other members of the project team it is essential to provide a solid and tangible contribution of professional expertise.
- Having specialized knowledge on project management relevant for project team members. A good project team member should know what are the most important project management topics and how to apply them in order to be integrated with the other project participants.
- Ethics. Kelley (1988) suggests that on top of the most important characteristics of an effective follower may be the willingness to tell the truth.

As the quantity of available information has increased exponentially, it has become imperative that team members provide truthful information. In addition, ethics is an important component of project management professional development (see the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct).

Initiative is the ability to take action on key issues of the project even in the absence of instructions or a precise order. Initiative means being proactive: do not wait to be told what to do; if you notice project situations that need to be revised or fixed, inform others of them, propose and if possible implement solutions without hesitation. Caleff (1995) in its five unique behaviors of courageous followers mentions: “they generate new ideas and initiate actions to improve external and internal processes. Courageous followers seek solutions and encourage others to do the same.”

Proactive behaviors normally produce positive results (Frese and Fay 2001) however other authors (Belschak, Den Hartog, and Fay 2010) acknowledge that personal initiative (as one type of proactivity at work) does not always have positive consequences; in combination with low skills, personal initiative may often lead to negative consequences. A type of initiative is to proactively establish relationships with stakeholders external to the project team (the so called boundary spanning behavior, see Marrone, Tesluk, and Carson, 2007) in order to gain useful information, to influence the stakeholders decisions and to control the stakeholders satisfaction.

Adaptability is the ability to be flexible in project contexts that are constantly changing. Workers need to be increasingly adaptable, versatile, and tolerant of uncertainty to operate effectively in these changing and varied environments (Pulakos, Donovan, and Plamondon 2000). Adaptability means knowing how to change perspective: projects are inherently uncertain and become clear along the way.

Influence is the ability to get other people involved in solutions to be adopted and/or actions to be taken in the overall organization of the project. Influence means being assertive: while it does not mean that one person has formal or hierarchical authority in the project group, sometimes results are obtained simply by influencing, collaborating and supporting one's point of view with solid arguments. Influence is an exercise of shared leadership, in fact “shared leadership occurs when all members of a team are fully engaged in the leadership of the team and are not hesitant to influence and guide their fellow team members in an effort to maximize the potential of the team as a whole. Simply put, shared leadership entails a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by “serial emergence” of official as well as unofficial leaders. In this sense, shared leadership can be considered a manifestation of fully developed empowerment in teams” (Pearce 2004). Finally Kelley (1992) defines exemplary followers as “.....willing to question leadership. This type of follower is critical to organizational success. Exemplary followers know how to work well with other cohorts and present themselves consistently to all who come into contact with them”.

PROJECT FOLLOWERSHIP ACTIONS

Project followership, in order to be such, must be translated into project management actions during the key stages of managing the project.

Project followership can be linked to project management processes. In fact, project followership actions are nothing more than project management activities for the use and consumption of project team members.

In table 1 the main project followership actions are linked to each project management processes group (PMI 2013).

| Project followership actions in project management processes | |
|--|--|
| Project management process group | Project followership actions |
| Initiating | Share the project mandate (kick-off meeting) |
| Planning | Collect and/or formalize requirements Develop the WBS (Work Breakdown Structure) Specify the characteristics of the individual WP (Work Package) each team member is responsible for Contribute to the definition of the logical relations between the different project tasks Identify, analyze and respond to project risks Develop Make-or-Buy assessments Describe the profile of the products/services to procure externally |
| Executing – Monitoring & Controlling | Coordinate the work of internal specialists and external suppliers Assess execution problems and suggest their solutions Circulate information on the execution of the project Report the actual values for both time and cost of each individual WP Assess development during the project progress reviews Assess the change requests to the initial plan Provide advice on re-planning the project Assess the compliance of project deliverables Supervise the acceptance of deliverables by the customer |
| Closing | Support the delivery stage of the project Describe the project experiences (lessons learned) |

PROJECT FOLLOWERSHIP DURING PROJECT INITIATION

The high-level profile of the project is defined during initiation, through a document known as the “project charter”. The project charter is first officially approved during initiation and is then presented to the stakeholders.

In project management jargon we talk about the “kick-off meeting”, meaning a meeting (or series of meetings) aimed at “kick starting” the project. Specifically, the kick-off is intended to inform and align the stakeholders most interested in the project. The Project Management Team (PMT) is undoubtedly one of them.

As previously pointed out several times, the success of the project is significantly influenced by the managerial contribution provided by the PMT as a whole. The initiation of the project is crucial in this regard. The PMT is in fact formed during initiation and reinforced through the mandate.

We might ask what actual contribution individual members of the PMT can honestly provide during the project initiation. The confusion comes from the fact that the “important decisions” have already been made: “whether to carry out the project or not; if yes, with what objectives, in respect of what constraints, with what implementation logic”. The answer is that project team members can and must provide an original contribution during project initiation.

Project Team Members, even when facing a pre-established scenario, must in fact perform a very important action, namely understanding and sharing the mandate (global vision). The precise understanding and sharing of the mandate is without doubt a necessary step in order for the PMT to operate well. It is one thing to passively adapt to the project, as decided upon earlier in the process, and another to ask questions and demand answers on the origin of the project, its profile and the organizational and business implications arising from it. Essentially it means being an active part of the kick-off meeting.

PROJECT FOLLOWERSHIP DURING PROJECT PLANNING

During planning the project mandate is transformed into a plan that can be executed. As stated in almost every book on project management, the PMT is the author of this fundamental step.

Project planning envisages members of the PMT working side by side, directed by the project manager. The stakeholders' needs are translated into project requirements which, in turn, must be broken down into the project's work structure, known as the WBS. An accountable person from within the PMT should be appointed for each element of the WBS, called Work Package or WP in jargon, and schedule and cost estimates should be documented that are as reliable as possible and shared. The sequence the project will be carried out in, the so-called “project schedule network diagram”, should also be agreed and the logical dependencies between the different activities clearly defined. The same care should be taken to

identify the project risks, select the priority risks and define the actions to respond to these risks.

“Is it possible to plan the project without the contribution of experts in the different subject matters covered?” Obviously it is not possible. Method and expertise are in fact the basic ingredients of successful planning. The mere application of planning methods, in the absence of solid specialized expertise, represents a content-poor work plan. Vice versa, proven but poorly organized and even less targeted skills lead to a waste of resources and poor quality results.

The real capacity of the PMT to implement widespread project management is unequivocally measured in project planning. Each project team members in fact are required to provide a twofold contribution: specialized expertise on the one hand and project management method on the other.

PROJECT FOLLOWERSHIP DURING PROJECT EXECUTION, MONITORING AND CONTROLLING

The project management plan is implemented by the PMT, effectively involving all the people forming part of the project team. Most of the resources allocated to the project, in order to carry out the tasks provided for in the plan, are used during execution.

Monitoring and control activities are also performed at the same time as the execution. Execution and control are two sides of the same coin. Project execution results feed the control system which in turn determines an initial review of the plan, with the consequent impact on the activities to be completed.

The PMT is at the heart of project execution and control. The members of the PMT, led by the project manager, coordinate the execution of different project strands, directly perform some of the set tasks and play a key role in controlling the project. Execution and control feed on project followership.

As regards execution, individual members of the PMT are required to distribute the work between the stakeholders interested in their project strand, circulate the necessary information and intervene in the event of problems, proposing and implementing solutions.

As regards to monitoring and control, project team members are required to actively contribute to the project progress report, in terms of collecting data and information on what has been accomplished, assessing the situation to date, formulating estimates to complete and developing corrective actions, where necessary.

The management of change requests to the initial plan is another area in which project followership is exercised. Change requests may be numerous and ambiguous. These requests should be systematically collected, categorized, assessed, and approved/rejected. In any case the applicant should be informed of the final decision, complete with explanations on the matter. The specialist and

managerial skill of the project team member makes a difference in how change requests are managed.

In jargon project results are called “deliverables”. Deliverables should be assessed in terms of their compliance with the initial plan specifications; they should then be presented to the customer and formally accepted. The assessment, presentation and acceptance of deliverables require the indispensable contribution of project team members.

PROJECT FOLLOWERSHIP DURING THE PROJECT CLOSURE

During project closure, activities and contracts are formally interrupted and stock is taken of what has been done and produced.

The project team member's contribution during closing is twofold: to support the transition into operation of the solution implemented by the project and to contribute to the production of “lessons learned”.

The project is a temporary initiative and its results should be incorporated within the organizations that participated in it. The project manager and PMT positions are temporary as is the project. The project achievements are handed over to specific permanent roles in the organizations involved.

As regards the mandate received, the project manager and members of the PMT typically assume an attitude clearly focused on deliverables: what counts is producing deliverables that conform with the specifications indicated in the project mandate. Once the mandate has been fulfilled, the project is finished and, after due consideration, the promised rewards can be expected. This is a good thing, but what of the solution implemented by the project: will it be used? If yes, what will the operating costs be? Will it generate the expected benefits? Will it improve the client's business? Will it justify the investment?

Modern project management practices argue that the PMT cannot fail to respond. The change in perspective is significant: from a “deliverable-oriented” approach to a “business-oriented” approach. It follows that the project team member must facilitate the handover, supporting the recipients of the solution provided by the project. In other words, the project team member must be familiar with the context of use, understand its distinct features and the priorities, operating in sync with it.

The other area requiring project followership during closing is the production of lessons learned. Experiences gained in the performance of the project should be revisited, distilled and modeled in order to produce a condensed set of rules, suggestions and ideas for the future, known as “lessons learned”. Without the experts, the production of lessons learned is practically impossible. Project team members are required to actively contribute in the production of lessons learned: they must bring their wealth of project experiences and knowhow to the PMT in order to compare their own experience with that of the others, so as to incorporate the most valuable elements in the project lessons learned.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern project management practices highlight the importance of the PMT as a center of excellence of project management. The PMT is required to exercise a widespread and consistent project management approach, guided by the wise direction of the project manager. This managerial capacity distributed in the project coordination team takes the name “project followership”. Each member of the PMT is required to provide a twofold contribution: specific expertise in their subject area and managerial skill in the key stages of the project. Project followership means “proactive participation in all aspects of the project work, both technical and managerial, within an individual's visibility horizon”.

There are six distinctive features of project followership, specifically: global vision, openness, professionalism, initiative, adaptability and influence.

Project followership is divided into a series of concrete actions, with reference to the different project management process groups. Project followership actions are nothing more than project management activities for the use and consumption of project team members.

Each member of the PMT is expressly required to endorse the typical actions of project followership and implement them, taking into account the specific project situation they are facing.

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