

Leveraging Expertise: What Every Project Manager Really Needs to Know about Leadership¹

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Abstract

In today's environment with pressures for organizational efficiency, business value and growth, costs constraints, increased profit, and enhanced transparency and accountability, organizations must not only address the proper management of projects, but also the *leadership of projects* in order to succeed. Leadership competence is not an optional project management skill, but a key part of being a successful and respected Project Manager.

As reported by PMI®'s *Project Management Talent Gap Report*, between 2010 and 2020, 15.7 million new project management roles will be created globally across seven project-intensive industries. If organizations fail to equip Project Managers with the skillsets required to fill future project management roles, significant initiatives will be at risk.

In order to ensure this occurs, Project Managers and project management practitioners must clearly understand that it takes true project management leadership to successfully drive today's aggressive and complex projects. Project management leadership combines select project management and leadership attributes with a risk-smart attitude and accountability-based behavior to achieve professional and personal success.

The goal of this paper is to build on PMI®'s Talent Triangle™ initiative and review the Project Management Leadership Model© to help Project Managers understand, assess, and strengthen needed leadership skills to meet today's project challenges and industry expectations.

Introduction

One would think that with the abundance of project management training and the proliferation of various project management certifications, we would see a corresponding increase in project success. This does not appear to be the case. Almost every time we pick up a magazine or receive an e-mail, an organization or individual is promoting some type of training—different types of vendors promising mastery of a topic in a few short days. All these promotions, referred to by the author as *silver bullets*, promise to help individuals become better Project Managers.

¹ *Second Editions* are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the [10th Annual UT Dallas Project Management Symposium in August 2016](#). It is republished here with the permission of the authors and conference organizers.

Experience has shown that many Project Managers have not developed the right mix of skills and behaviours to be effective and successful. It almost seems that the technology and tools that we use today, such as e-mail or social media, are considered more important than the actual soft skills that Project Managers so dearly need.

In a way, these powerful tools cause us to skip or ignore the basics. As a result, our risk awareness suffers as we place our ability to listen effectively on the back burner. This lack of understanding of our current situation results in a significant lack of accountability. The end result is that we would rather focus on what is easy, not what is important.

What Has Happened?

We would all agree that most projects have undergone a drastic change over the last 10 to 15 years, or, in fact, even before that. There is probably no better example of this than the phenomenal growth of Information Technology (IT) projects and initiatives. In the past, IT was merely an option for our projects. But in today's world, e-mail, as an example, is no longer an optional tool. It has become the core of just about any activity or project that we do. The IT industry has changed everything, and those who don't embrace it are simply left behind.

In today's competitive and fast-paced environment, Project Managers in all business sectors and project management roles face many challenges in successfully delivering the best product, project solution, or service.

These challenges include such things as:

- 1) Tighter budgets which, because of increased customer expectations and all these new software tools, tend to be much more heavily monitored and scrutinized.
- 2) Much shorter implementation schedules on traditional projects than ever before. For example, an IT installation and training project may now take only two months to complete. The project may be started and finished even before it is properly set up in the organization's financial reporting system.
- 3) Global teams with varying and, at times, conflicting cultures and practices. With global teams comes the required management of those teams. Many do not realize the burden this places on a Project Manager.
- 4) Countless tools and software applications, each promising to be the silver bullet that will help make the management of our projects easier. Although these tools can be beneficial, Project Managers need to consider them very carefully and determine which ones they truly need. *Tools do not replace leadership.*
- 5) A project's impact on end users. For example, a small software update of a security feature in a large, global organization may impact thousands of users.

- 6) Daily flood of e-mails and instant communications in which everybody considers their message to be the most important and expects an immediate response.
- 7) Instantaneous reports showing progress against plan. What previously took weeks of effort compiling documents can now be done in, literally, a few hours or less.

When you pull all these factors together, Project Managers now also face the serious challenge of effectively implementing time management for their daily activities.

Clearly, things have changed significantly. Project management has moved from the old-fashioned paper and charts pinned up on the wall to instantaneous communications, agile methodologies, Scrum Masters, sophisticated software-based decision tools, and cloud-based computing.

There has been a shift. As a result of this shift, the “Art” of being a Project Manager is slowly being lost.

Project Managers need to realize that standards, methodologies, and the tools available today improve their performance only to a certain extent. They are not the answer to everything. They are not silver bullets.

Project Managers need to ensure they also have the correct mix of skills and behaviours to be successful.

The Importance of Leadership Skills

A large number of references, handbooks, textbooks, and courses are available for Project Managers to become more familiar with the concepts of leadership. An excellent starting point reference is the PMI® White Paper *Building High-Performance Project Talent* (PMI 2013) which outlines the concept of the PMI® Talent Triangle™.

The PMI® Talent Triangle™ is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: PMI® Talent Triangle™

According to PMI®, while technical skills are core to project and program management, they're not enough in today's increasingly complex and competitive global marketplace. Companies are seeking added skills in leadership and business intelligence - competencies that can support longer-range strategic objectives that contribute to the bottom line.

An additional reference is the PMI® *Pulse of the Profession* (PMI 2016) which, based on industry surveys, identifies the priority of developing the needed PMI® Talent Triangle™ skills. The results show that approximately 39 % of the organizations surveyed consider leadership skills a priority.

This may be correlated to an observation made in the PMI® White Paper *Building High-Performance Project Talent* (PMI 2013) that states 66% of organizations say that leadership skills are not as teachable but are most important for early success in project management.

With a priority for needed leadership skills and a perception that these skills are a challenge to teach, there is a challenge on how best to proceed. Why is there a perception that leadership skills are a challenge to teach? In the opinion of the author, what is missing is a concise and consistent approach for the assessment of Project Manager performance - one that clearly shows busy Project Managers what they really needed to focus on.

The Challenge

Many organizations struggle with defining observable leadership behaviours that are expected from a Project Manager. Although numerous models for expected Project Manager behaviours exist, basic issues emerge in their practical application. This is a key point - Project Managers are extremely busy individuals and need to focus on what is important.

Project management certification and training are an excellent foundation for understanding what needs to be done and in what order. But these alone do not give the qualifications to become a recognized and successful Project Manager. They help, but there's much more involved. In the experience of the author, many Project Managers have not developed the right mix of skills and behaviours to be successful.

Project Managers need to realize that standards, methodologies, and the numerous tools available today improve their performance only to a certain extent. They are not the answer to everything. They are not silver bullets.

What makes a Project Manager a successful (referred to by the author as *outstanding*) Project Manager? The secret is in how well they have mastered *project management leadership*. It takes true project management leadership to successfully drive today's aggressive and complex projects.

Project Management Leadership

Project Managers need to understand that management is not the same as leadership. Typically, these terms are used interchangeably and, most of time, incorrectly. Management and leadership are not the same. This is where most issues begin.

Management is the ability to get the job done while leadership refers to having a vision, sharing the vision with the team, and then setting the course to achieve the vision. Project management leadership combines both of these skills together to lay the foundation of outstanding Project Managers.

Project management leadership combines select project management and leadership skills with a risk skills and accountability. Refer to Figure 2.

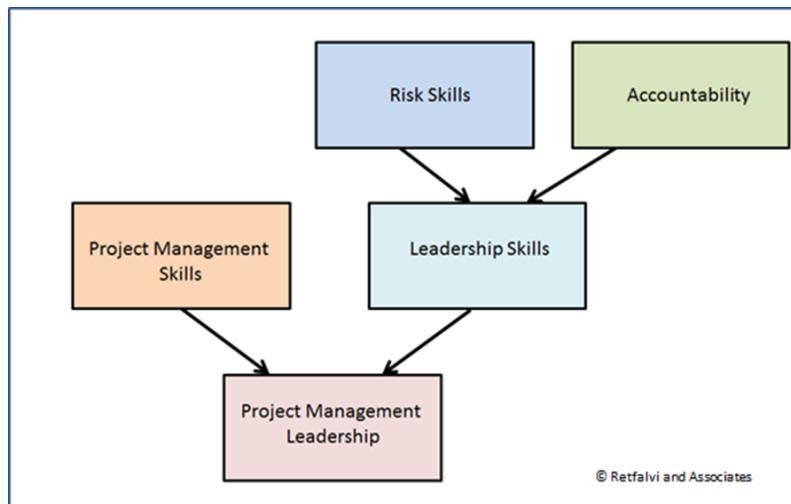


Figure 2: Project Management Leadership

Why are these last two behaviours emphasized? Because they are very important. These two areas make such a difference in the performance of Project Managers that they need to be called out separately. Putting emphasis on these two areas individually provides a new context for their meaning and intent.

The Power of Project Management Leadership - Your Guide to How to Achieve Outstanding Results (Retfalvi 2014) introduces the Project Management Leadership Model©. The Project Management Leadership Model comprises four key components - project management expertise, core leadership skills, a risk-smart attitude, and accountability-based behavior - with emphasis placed on the last two.

These two areas are so important that they are front and center in the model. The Project Management Leadership Model© is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: The Project Management Leadership Model

The attributes of the Project Management Leadership Model© are summarized below:

1. **Project management expertise:** Knowing how to plan, manage, and handle details in a way that lets others relax. This knowledge is formed by a combination of his or her education, training, and experience.
2. **Core leadership skills:** Having a vision, sharing it with the project team, and then setting the course using your ability to *inspire trust and confidence*. You need to know how to interact with people so that they will want to help you turn your vision into a reality.
3. **Risk-smart attitude:** Honestly understanding and accepting the reality of your surroundings and where you are now. A risk-smart attitude is not about being averse to risks, and it's not about seeking risks. It's about carefully managing the balance between the two. Risks include threats and opportunities
4. **Accountability-based behaviour:** Having a willingness to openly accept the consequences for something you have done or something that you're supposed to do. It is the foundation of project management leadership, and it's a key ingredient in implementing change

Each of the above key components of the model has a number of subcomponents, or attributes. Further details of each component and associated attributes may be found in *The Power of Project Management Leadership - Your Guide to How to Achieve Outstanding Results* (Retfalvi 2014).

The purpose of the arrows on the perimeter of the model is to remind that the model is iterative, focused on improving Project Manager performance over time. The requirement is to work on

the components and attributes of the model continually. Just as the environment around you changes, you have to change if you want to stay on top of your game.

The key to achieving success with this model is to integrate all four components while ensuring balance between them. Although each individual component plays an important part in the model, the interaction between all the components is what makes the biggest difference. Refer to Figure 4.

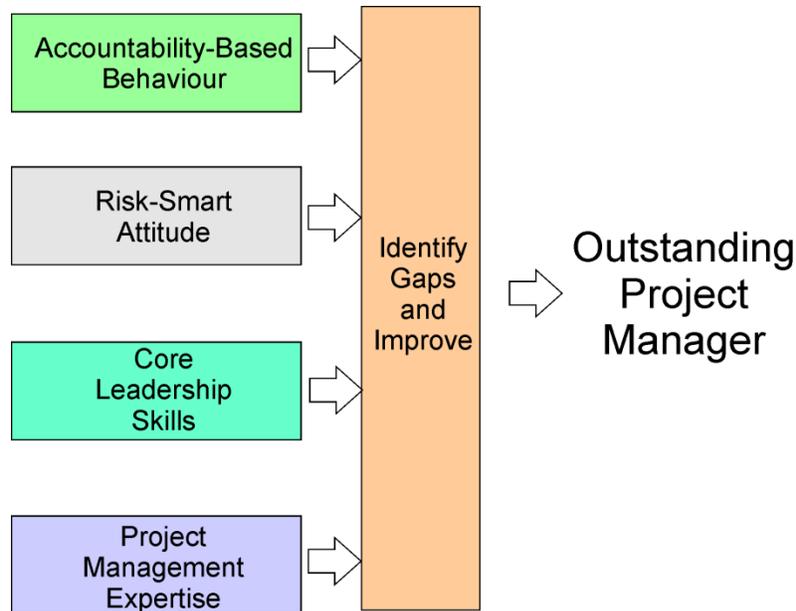


Figure 4: The Project Management Leadership Model - Process

All four components must be in play at the same time if you want to be an outstanding Project Manager. It can thus be said that the sum of the components is far greater than the individual components on their own. When all of the attributes work together, the model exhibits a multiplier effect over each individual attribute.

An important aspect is the need for Project Managers to evaluate themselves using the model and to identify opportunities for improvement. Structured feedback from others is an excellent method by which to increase your project management leadership performance.

A challenge for many Project Managers is how best to apply project management leadership when dealing with various members of their team. Applying situational leadership builds on the establishment of *trust and confidence* by providing the needed flexibility in leadership approach based on the situation at hand.

Situational Leadership as an Enabler

Leadership-Theory and Practice (Northouse, 2nd Edition) highlights that one of the most widely recognized approaches to leadership is the situational approach, originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard. *Situational Leadership II* (K. Blanchard Companies) is focused on leaders being able to diagnose the needs of an individual or a group and then use the appropriate leadership style to respond to the needs of the person or group.

Leadership styles are characterized into four behaviour types; directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Each type of leadership style aligns with the four development level of the follower(s). Refer to Figure 5.

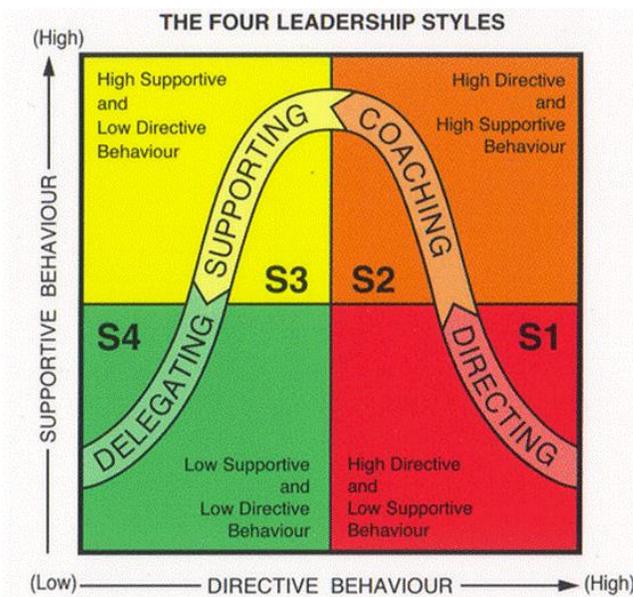


Figure 5: The Situational II Leadership Model

The most successful Project Managers are those who adapt their leadership style to the maturity of the group or individual they are leading. Situational Leadership is an excellent technique to increase your Project Management Leadership success. It is ideal for use with team members whose commitment and competence change over the duration of a project.

Position Yourself as an Agent of Change

Many Project Managers confuse Change Management with Change Control. In its simplest definition, change control is a systematic approach to managing all changes made to a product or system. The purpose is to ensure that no unnecessary changes are made and that all changes are documented to maintain needed scope, cost, and schedule.

Change Management, on the other hand, is about people. Leadership is about establishing direction and influencing others to want to follow that direction. Leadership is also about people and change affects people. By extension, leadership involves change.

Project management practices offer limited practical guidance in how to plan and motivate individuals to change. Most Project Managers tend to spend the majority of their time worrying about practical issues with deliverables and timelines, not the people involved in the change. The best approach is to set clear expectations to assist in reducing any anxiety that may arise.

Project Managers need to understand the dynamics of change and that they will encounter levels of resistance to change they are helping bring in. Combining project and change capabilities as part of project management leadership will set the needed foundation to become a needed force for positive change in your organization.

The Bottom Line

Leadership competence is critical in today's project management environment. What many refer to as *soft skills* are now the needed hard skills. To be a successful Project Manager, your actions must inspire *trust and confidence* in your project team and in the stakeholders you work with. Project Management Leadership is about people. If others do not have trust and confidence in you, they will not believe your message.

Conclusion

Organizations must not only address the proper management of projects, but also the *leadership of projects* in order to succeed. Leadership competence is not an optional project management skill, but a key part of being a successful and respected Project Manager. Project Managers who are leaders motivate, challenge, and get the best out of their project teams.

Project management leadership combines select project management and leadership attributes with a risk-smart attitude and accountability-based behavior. By using the Project Management Leadership Model© as part of a Project Manager's project management leadership development, the benefits include not only improved professional and personal success performance, but improved chances of successful project execution and organizational success.

About the Author



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Laszlo Retfalvi is currently Principal of [Retfalvi and Associates](#). Laszlo is past Vice-President of the Program and Risk Management Office (PRMO) at Allen Vanguard (now [Allen Vanguard Corporation](#) and [Med-Eng](#)). Previously, Laszlo held roles with General Dynamics, Irving Corporation, and SED Systems. Laszlo is also an instructor at [University of California Irvine Extension Department of Business Management](#).

A seasoned 30 year veteran of engineering, project management and business in private and public sectors, Laszlo is author of *The Power of Project Management Leadership: Your Guide on How to Achieve Outstanding Results* (CS Publishing March 2014). Further information may be found at [PMI Marketplace](#).

A leader focused on accountability, leadership, and business success, Laszlo is also a recipient of the 2013 UCI Extension Distinguished Instructor Award. Laszlo has been happily married to Lisa for over 30 years and they have two wonderful sons, Andrew and Alexander.

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