

***Positive Leadership in Project Management*¹**

Leading Through Difficult Times²

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I think it's safe to say that difficult times can be expected to be experienced by the project manager and team at some points in time during most project life cycles. The level of difficulty depends on several factors:

- The complexity of the project
- The degree of planning and preparation
- Degree of uncertainty (risk)
- The skills of the project manager – leadership, management, negotiation, problem solving etc.
- Personalities of the stakeholders
- Upper management involvement (and meddling)
- Politics
- Resource availability
- Changing requirements
- Many other factors!

The most difficult times for a project manager (or any leader) are those associated with periods of great uncertainty during which environmental factors (factors that cannot be directly influenced by the project manager and team) threaten the stability of the project (or organization) and the confidence of the people within the team or organization. Truly effective leaders are aware of the potential bad times that may be encountered and place significant effort in planning for them while enjoying and celebrating achievements and progress of the teams they lead. A major element of that enjoyment is the pride a leader feels when teams work together to deliver high performance, meet objectives, and display a winning attitude.

It is especially during periods of prosperity and success that effective leaders maintain a watchful eye on the uncertainties that lie ahead. For example, we have seen in this the current world economy, the rapid advances in technology, the impact of Artificial Intelligence and many other factors, that change occurs rapidly with little or time for detailed preparation. The economic and technology lessons learned the last 6 months alone have caused many organizations to redefine themselves in terms of strategic direction, product offerings, research and development, and

¹This article is one in a series on Positive Leadership in Project Management by Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow, popular speaker and author of books on leadership in project management published by Wiley and IIL in the United States. Frank is widely known as the originator of the International Project Management Day, the annual celebrations and educational events conducted each November by PMI members, chapters and organizations around the world. Learn more in his profile at the end of this article.

² How to cite this paper: Saladis, F. (2019). Leading Through Difficult Times: Positive Leadership in Project Management series article 3. *PM World Journal*, Vol. VIII, Issue XI, December.

financial capability. What appeared to be a relatively secure market position for many organizations has been transformed into a quagmire of uncertainty. This is where the true leader emerges. It is important to work towards stability in times of crisis. Understanding that stability and control is not actually 100% plausible, the leader should attempt, during a period of extreme crisis, to establish a “known and stable state” to allow time for diagnosis.

A lesson can be learned from the emergency room at any given hospital. A patient is transported in. The situation is serious. No time for a diagnosis at this time. The ER team springs into action performing a triage to determine the immediate action required. Vital signs are checked and the goal is to stabilize the patient. Once that has been accomplished a detailed diagnosis can begin.

In the movie Apollo 13, Gene Kranz, played by actor Ed Harris, saw his highly trained and skilled team reach near panic when the space module experienced the explosion. As the flight director, and leader of this team, he quickly took action to regain focus for the team. He stopped them from continuing their crisis driven behavior by directing them to work from a position of “status” and guided them to think not in terms of what had failed but in terms of what was still functioning. His focus was two-fold – deal with the crisis by understanding the full situation and demonstrating to the astronauts that they should have confidence in the ability of the team, and keeping the team’s energy driving toward a solution through positive thinking.

Any leader knows there is risk in every decision and each decision requires some analysis before it is executed. In project management we refer to this as *impact analysis*. It is a commonly performed step in most change control processes and during risk assessment. Impact analysis provides the leader and the team with an opportunity to develop scenarios about what could happen as a result of a decision. In crisis situations the amount of time for analysis is limited and decisions must be made quickly. These decisions can have monumental consequences. For this reason it is important for leaders to consider potentially unfavorable situations during periods of calm and relative stability. During these periods, rational and critical thinking can occur along with some level of innovation and creativity.

In the book “The Art of the Long View”, Doubleday, 1991,1996, author Peter Schwartz suggests that since we cannot predict the future, the leader should “re-perceive” the future by developing scenarios about what could happen. He suggested that teams should become “contingency prepped.” These scenarios are compared with current trends and changes in the business environment and strategies are developed based on which of the scenario seems to be most in line with what is occurring or is likely to occur. This approach may not completely protect the organization from the effects of a bad economy or other unfavorable situations, but it can prepare the organization to deal with these situations more effectively and with greater stability and sustainability.

One of my favorite quotes is “Chance favors the prepared mind” – Louis Pasteur. Leaders do not rely on luck to achieve success for their organizations, they prepare themselves by honing their leadership skills and they think in terms of possibilities and probabilities. They listen to other points of view, they surround themselves with thinkers and experts, they talk with employees, and they focus on quality and continuous improvement. Leaders also develop loyalty within their organizations by explaining current challenges and keeping their teams and employees informed. They also show a great deal of respect for their teams. Loyalty is a key factor (perhaps the most

important factor) when managing difficult times and can mean the difference between surviving the rough seas and turmoil of the business world and sinking in the storm.

There is certainly no secret formula or a guaranteed methodology for managing in a crisis but there are some things a leader can do to keep their teams focused and the organization reasonably stable while dealing with the unrest, uncertainty, and rapid changes that accompany difficult times.

The following is a suggested checklist for achieving positive leadership in a challenging environment:

1. Remain visible to your team. They need to see you out there, among them, observing, learning and experiencing what they are experiencing.
2. Show confidence in yourself. A shaky leader creates a shaky team.
3. Provide guidance and support. They need to see a steady hand and an attentive, positive attitude.
4. Stay “cool.” It is not easy to do but it is necessary. Coolness during difficult times means remaining calm, showing a strong image, and a confident stride. True leaders know how to manage with self- confidence, empathy, and without being condescending, threatening, or overly emotional. Leaders must avoid “flying off the handle” and losing control when control is exactly what is needed.
5. Tell the truth. Many leaders attempt to spin information. People will see through the facade and lose respect for the leader. Town hall meetings, small group discussions, and one on one talks where solid, factual information is shared will keep the organization functioning. It is also important to show that the leader is human during these sessions.
6. Keep the team focused on mission critical issues and projects. Avoid distractions.
7. Remain enthusiastic about the organization. Talk about opportunities, encourage new ideas, avoid gloom and doom analogies. Be honest and don’t sugar coat the situation. People should have confidence that you are fully aware of the current situation and are realistic about the future.

Leadership can be challenging when an organization or a team faces difficult situations, but it is during those times that the true leader emerges to inspire, provide hope, and create a positive attitude that will sustain the organization.

About the Author



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Frank P. Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow is the Owner/Founder of Blue Marble Enterprises Inc. and Project Imaginers. Frank is an accomplished leader and contributor in the discipline of project management. He is the author of 12 published books, the past editor of the All PM Newsletter and the author of over 160 project management articles. Frank provides training and consulting internationally and has educated and entertained countless audiences with a special blend of project management knowledge and tasteful humor. He is also an experienced and well-known project management instructor and consultant and a member of the PMI® Seminars World team of trainers. Mr. Saladis' 35 year career includes 28.5 years with AT&T, 3 years with Cisco Systems, and more than 25 years as a professional trainer, facilitator, mentor and keynote speaker.

Frank is the Originator/Founder of International Project Management Day which launched in 2004 and has been growing in recognition yearly. The goal of International Project Management Day is the worldwide recognition of the many project managers and project teams in every industry including nonprofit organizations and health care who contribute their time, energy, creativity, innovation, and countless hours to deliver products, services, facilities, and provide emergency and disaster recovery services in every city and community around the world.

Frank was PMI's 2006 Person of the Year. Frank is a Project Management Professional, a graduate from the PMI Leadership Institute Master's class, and has contributed significantly to the organization's growth and knowledge base for more than 20 years. His leadership activity within PMI included the position of President of the New York City PMI chapter from 1991-2001, President of the Assembly of Chapter Presidents, and Chair of the Education and Training Specific Interest Group. He received the high honor of the "PMI Fellow Award" in October 2013 and received the very prestigious "PMI Distinguished Contribution Award" in October 2015.

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