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Leadership in a Project Environment
by Laszlo A. Retfalvi
Advisory Article

Leadership in a Project Environment[1]

Tips and Techniques to Help You Succeed

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Abstract

In today's complex project and business environment, organizations must not only address the effective management of projects, but also the _leadership of projects_ in order to succeed. Leadership competence, even more today than ever in the past, is no longer seen as an optional project management skill, but a key part of being a successful and respected Project Manager. We need to recognize this new norm – there is simply no way around it.

As reported by PMI®'s *PMI (2017) Project Management Job Growth and Talent Gap 2017–2027*, the project management-oriented labor force in seven project-oriented sectors is expected to grow by 33 percent, or nearly 22 million new jobs through 2027 of 11 countries on 5 continents surveyed. If organizations fail to adequately address talent management and equip Project Managers with the skillsets required to fill anticipated 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 aggressive and complex projects. Project management leadership combines select project management and leadership attributes with a risk-smart attitude and accountability-based behaviour to achieve professional and personal success.

The goal of this paper is to review the Project Management Leadership Model© and provide proven tips and techniques to help Project Managers understand, assess, and strengthen needed leadership skills to meet todays and future industry expectations.

Introduction

One would think that with the advance of agile based techniques, 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.

As reported by PMI®'s *PMI (2018) Pulse of the Profession 2018- Success in Disruptive Time,* although there has been a reduction since 2013 in the amount of money that organizations waste

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due to poor project performance, of the 5402 professional surveyed, this value remains at 9.8 %. This equals $99 million for every $1 billion invested. Also reported was 57% of projects finished within their initial budgets, 52% of projects finished within their initially scheduled times, and 5% were considered failures.

Almost every time we pick up a magazine, receive an e-mail, or read a blog, an organization or individual is promoting some type of project management related training. Different types of vendors promising mastery of a topic in a few short days or promoting the investment of new methodologies or workflows. All these promotions, referred to by the author as *silver bullets*, promise to help individuals become better Project Managers.

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, instant messaging, 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.

In the opinion of the author, the end result is that we would rather focus on what is easy and glitzy, not what is important. *This needs to change.*

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.

Key Takeaway #1: *Project Managers are extremely busy individuals and need to focus on what is important. We need to help them to do so by providing a succinct, proven talent development framework to use and built on.*

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, proven and emerging 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, complex, and distributed work force projects.

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Key Takeaway #2: *Project management leadership success is not only based on individual success, but on team success. Project Managers must demonstrate awareness that team dynamics, culture, and employee well-being are driving forces behind organizational success. A bonus - Project Managers have the unique potential to positively influence and be an energizing force in attracting and retaining the best talent in an organization.*

Project Aristotle

An excellent article by The New York Times (The New York Times Company, C, Duhigg, February 2016) titled *"What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team"* identified what Google®, using an internal survey and study named *Project Aristotle*, found that makes teams effective.

They include meaning, impact, structure and clarity, dependability and psychological safety. Upon first glance, these appear straight forward. What is surprising, however, is the order of importance of these items from the study.

The order of importance is shown in Figure 1 (J. Rozovsky, Google People Operations, Google re:Work, November 2015).

1 Psychological Safety
Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

2 Dependability
Team members get things done on time and meet Google's high bar for excellence.

3 Structure & Clarity
Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.

4 Meaning
Work is personally important to team members.

5 Impact
Team members think their work matters and creates change.

Figure 1: Google® Project Aristotle Results

Exceeding anything else, a sense of psychological safety, or a shared belief that the team is a safe place for interpersonal interaction and risk-taking, was critical for making the team function effectively. Organizations with a trusting workplace perform better.

Key Takeaway #3: *Senior Leadership needs to focus on how to purposefully build a psychologically safe environment within an organization. Project Managers need to do the same with their teams. Project Managers have a significantly greater opportunity for personal success if this is in place.*

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The Project Management Leadership Model© is a powerful method by which to assist in establishing and building psychological safety in project-based organizations.

For additional information on the concept of psychological safety, refer to the excellent work by Dr. Amy Edmondson (Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management, Harvard Business School) in this area, including TED Talks (TED.com).

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 risk skills and accountability. Refer to Figure 2.
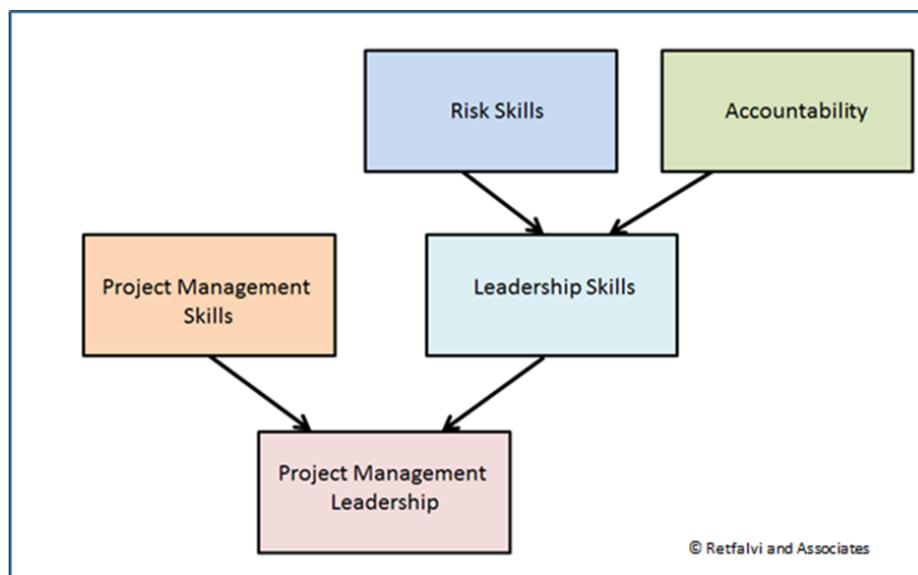

Figure 2: Project Management Leadership

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. They are feeders to success.

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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 behaviour - 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

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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*.

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.

Key Takeaway #4: *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.*
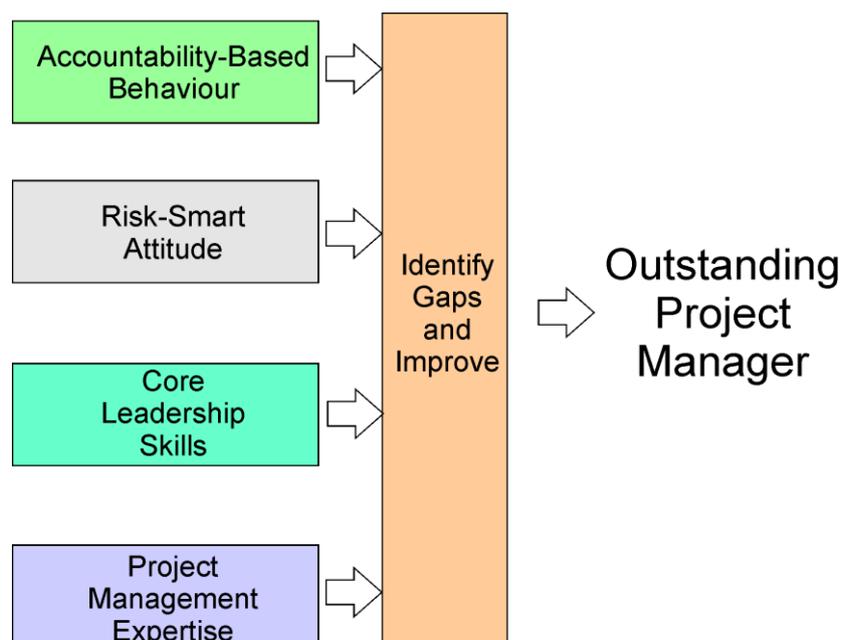

Figure 4: The Project Management Leadership Model© - Integration

All four components must be in play at the same time if you want to be an outstanding Project Manager. 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.

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The 30 Minute Project Management Leadership Challenge

The Project Manager Leadership Model© is all about focus. It's about focusing on what is important, not what is easy. Easy is what our bad habits represent.

The *30 Minute Project Management Leadership Challenge* is a quick and effective method by which Project Managers may initially learn about themselves based on honest and open feedback from others. As mentioned previously, Project Managers are extremely busy individuals. This technique gets to the point quickly. It is also applicable and recommended for all project management practitioners and individuals who interact with Project Managers as part of their work.

The *30 Minute Project Management Leadership Challenge* comprises of the following steps:

1) Identify a colleague you will work with as a "leadership buddy".

2) Complete an honest initial assessment of yourself and of your partner. Your partner does the same. Refer to Figure 5.

3) Share the results and openly discuss. Ensure you are constructive and use examples.

4) For each component – work together and identify one improvement each of you will strive to improve. Keep in mind small "nudges" lead to big changes.

5) Agree to follow up and compare progress. Ensure you hold yourselves accountable to each other.

Component	Initial Assessment		
Project Management Expertise	Weak	Average	Strong
Core Leadership Skills	Weak	Average	Strong
Risk-Smart Attitude	Weak	Average	Strong
Accountability-Based Behaviour	Weak	Average	Strong

Figure 5: The Project Management Leadership Model© Initial Assessment

Do not worry at this point about the exact definitions of weak, average, and strong. This is meant to be a quick assessment to identify any major gaps by performing an honest initial assessment based on your current knowledge of the four components.

Key Takeaway #5: *The main outcome of this initial assessment is that what you think of yourself may be significantly different than what others think of you. Your next steps are to determine why and what you plan to do to address this disconnect.*

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Participants have the opportunity to do a more detailed assessment and review techniques to improve in each component and attribute area. Additional details may be found in *The Power of Project Management Leadership - Your Guide to How to Achieve Outstanding Results*.

The Bottom Line

Leadership competence is critical in a project management environment. What many refer to as *soft skills* are now the needed hard skills. There is simply no way around this. To be a successful Project Manager, your actions must enhance psychological safety by inspiring *trust and confidence* in your project team, stakeholders, and organization.

Key Takeaway #6: *Project Management Leadership is about people. If others do not have trust and confidence in you, they will not believe your message. Project Managers must work diligently to avoid this scenario. Project Managers who are true leaders motivate, challenge, and get the best out of their project teams.*

Conclusion

Organizations must not only address the proper management of projects, but also the <u>leadership of projects</u> 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 management leadership combines select project management and leadership attributes with a risk-smart attitude and accountability-based behaviour.

By using the Project Management Leadership Model© and the *30 Minute Project Management Leadership Challenge* as part of a Project Manager's project management leadership development, the benefits include not only improved professional and personal success, but improved chances of successful project execution and organizational success.

It is also recommended and beneficial for all project management practitioners and individuals who interact with Project Managers as part of their work.

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Laszlo Retfalvi is General Manager of Retfalvi and Associates.

Previous roles include Vice-President of the Program and Risk Management Office (PRMO) at Allen Vanguard Corporation, Director of the Program Management Center of Excellence at Shared Services Canada, and Director of Integrated Sensor Systems at General Dynamics Canada. Previously, Laszlo held roles with the Irving Corporation and SED Systems.

A seasoned 30+ year veteran of engineering, project management and business in private and public sectors, Laszlo and his teams have successfully managed and delivered products, systems, and services to Military, Para-Military, Public, Government, and Private Customers. Areas of expertise include independent reviews, risk workshops, schedule and cost risk analysis.
Laszlo is an award winning instructor, author, and coach. With a passion to help individuals succeed, Laszlo is currently an Instructor at University of California Irvine Extension. Laszlo is also an Instructor at Oregon State University Professional and Continuing Education. Areas include Project Planning, Risk Management, Leadership and High Performance Teams.

Laszlo is author of *The Power of Project Management Leadership: Your Guide on How to Achieve Outstanding Results* (CS Publishing March 2014) including the *Project Management Leadership Model©,* a framework to develop personal project management leadership excellence. A recognized industry speaker, Laszlo has published and delivered over 70 papers and presentations internationally, including PMI® ProjectManagement.com Risk and Leadership Community of Practice Premium on Demand webinars with over 50,000 views to date.

Laszlo has been happily married to Lisa for over 33 years and they have two wonderful sons, Andrew and Alexander.

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