

Women in Project Management: Opportunities for Leadership Success^{1, 2}

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Abstract

There is an increasing gap worldwide between employers' need for skilled individuals in project management and the availability of professionals to fill these roles. This indicates significant current and future opportunities in the field of project management.

It is vitally important and ethically sound to close the current opportunity gap for women in project management by providing women a chance to utilize their leadership skills for successful project execution and completion. Since studies have shown women are as competent, or more competent, leaders who are typically underrepresented in project management, it would be vital to consider increasing the hiring of female project managers for the sake of gender equity, ethical leadership, and project success. This is a strategy to reduce the opportunity gap for women and the continuing need to fill professional positions in project management.

There are several recommendations made to utilize the leadership skill sets of women that can meet the projected need for female project managers. Of the various skills required by project managers, three categories of skills include: 1) main leadership skills, including communication and ethical behavior, 2) relationship skills, including

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collaboration/teamwork, inspiration/motivation, and development of others, and 3) task skills, including delivering results, analysis, and problem solving.

Key words: *project management, women in project management, leadership skills*

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Introduction

Results from the Project Management Institute (PMI) study “Job Growth and Talent Gap 2017 to 2027” (PMI, 2017) indicate that there is widening gap worldwide between the industry need for skilled project managers and the availability of professionals to fill those roles. This points to significant current and future opportunities in the field. There are several catalysts for this gap, including:

- 1) A dramatic increase in the number of jobs requiring project oriented skills,
- 2) Attrition rates, including professionals retiring from the workforce, and
- 3) A significant uptick in demand for project management talent, especially in rapidly developing economies such as China and India (PMI, 2017).

Also of importance is the gender inequality in hiring for positions in various fields, including project management leadership, which has been historically male dominated. According to one study, reported by Berger (2016) there is a large gender disparity across all major sectors within the leadership of the project management field. Based on the top five project management industries, construction is 93.5% male and 6.5% female, telecommunications is 73.4% male and 26.6% female, consulting services is 71% male and 29% female, while information technology is 68.7% male and 31.3% female. There is more parity in financial services where it is 52.1% male and 47.9% female (Berger, 2016).

Based on their skills, background, and experience, women are in a strong position to succeed as project managers when provided the opportunity to lead larger projects in more venues, as mentioned above, as well as in the growing field of health care. It is important and necessary to reduce this opportunity gap for women in project management.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze leadership skills important to project management success and review the most valuable set of skills that can be exhibited by women leading to personal and career growth on a path for success in project management. This will help reduce the gap in opportunities for women and reduce the gap in employment shortfalls in project management.

Growth in Project Management Jobs

In today's global economy, jobs have become more project-oriented, as the variety of skills used in project management have expanded in a range of industries. These industries include areas such as health care, information technology, and professional services. While manufacturing and construction are still the leading sectors for openings in project management skill areas, an analysis shows that the health care sector in the United States has a 17% growth in project-oriented jobs (PMI, 2017).

More specifically, the Anderson Economic Group (AEG) and PMI analyzed project-oriented employment opportunities and found that in the United States, between 2017 and 2027, there will be an increase of 2.1 million jobs or 213,974 new jobs per year (PMI, 2017). It was noted that project managers contribute to a nation's productivity and there is a possibility of a \$22.5 billion GDP risk reduction in the US economy if project positions are not filled.

The PMI analysis of talent gap supports the issue that future demand for project managers is growing faster than demand for workers in other occupations. This necessitates a review of the opportunities, strategies, and pathways project managers may follow to be best prepared for successful employment in the field, as well as using appropriate strategies to hire more qualified women. The skills needed for project success can be met by the increasing use of the talents and skills of more females in project management leadership.

Varga and Czipzarik-Kocsir (2017) noted the 2015 work of the Association for Project Management that indicated, on average, there are four times as many male project managers as females, although these percentages may differ in certain countries and in employment sectors. Nevertheless, the number of women in project management roles is an area of concern that must be recognized and addressed.

Leadership

Dubrin (2019) defined leadership as the ability to inspire support and confidence among the people who are needed to achieve organizational goals. Leadership was clarified by Daft (2018) as an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purpose. Both ideas have value in this discussion.

According to Littman and Littman (2017), leadership involves the 4 I's; intentions (goals of the project), influence (on other people, organization, society) impact (outcome of the project), and integrity (honest dealings in the project). These are the ideals that successful leaders should model. This leadership direction is highly valuable for the success of any organization. Working together, appropriately guided by an encouraging leader, an organization's goals should be reached. This will lead to the success of the project.

Leadership is a set of skills and experiences, goal orientation, influences, and impacts that are not gender specific. Strong leadership today can be provided by both men and women. Research has shown that there are certain differences between the leadership styles and skills of men and women. Zenger and Folkman (2019) reported that women scored higher than men in most leadership skills. This supports the notion that women are just as competent and, in some cases, more competent, than men. This is a sign that there are opportunities for women in leadership positions.

Leadership Skills for Women

Currently, there are more men than women in leadership roles in most organizations. Today, as more women have attained higher levels of education, enhanced their experiences, and gained skills related to leadership, there needs to be greater opportunities available for women leaders in all areas of the business and the professional world.

In a number of studies, female leaders self-reported and were perceived by their subordinates as being strong leaders. When direct reports reviewed the male and female managers, subordinates largely found female leaders to be the more competent party. According to Burger (2018), "Women were seen as more effective when they held senior-level management position ... The notion that cognitive load leads to the increase use of stereotypes holds true; however, rather than relying on stereotype of men's greater leadership effectiveness, organizational members may rely upon a different, newer stereotype: that women are more effective leaders."

Paustain-Underdahi, Walker, and Woehr (2014), in a meta-analysis across 95 studies, found that when all leadership contacts are considered, men and women do not differ in perceived leadership effectiveness. When other ratings only are examined, women are rated as significantly more effective than men. In contrast, when self-ratings only are examined, men rate themselves is significantly more effective as leaders than women rate themselves.

Since studies have shown women are as competent, or more competent, leaders who are typically underrepresented in project management, it would be important to consider increasing the hiring of female project managers for the sake of gender equity, ethical leadership, and project success. This is a strategy to reduce the opportunity gap for women and the continuing need to fill professional positions in project management.

Women Leadership Skills for Success in Project Management

In a growth area such as project management, it is critical to use available talents of the people in the project management field. According to Jones (2018), women are a powerful force in project management. A limiting factor is that women may miss potential opportunities for leadership. Women often do not get the same opportunities as men, and, therefore do not assume the same number of leadership roles in project

management. When this opportunity is lost, it harms that individual, as well as possibly impacting the timely completion and success of projects.

Although Varga and Czigzarik-Kocsir (2017) found no fundamental differences between the project management successes based on gender, they noted the value of a leader's personal integrity, expertise, and people-centered approach. This is the starting point for focusing on the most important leadership skills women can exhibit to be successful project managers. Clarification will be based the following categories of project management skills: 1) main leadership skills, 2) relationship (people) skills, and 3) tasks (expertise) skills. All of these skills are considered critical for successful project management, and all are skills that women may focus on to improve their presence in the project management arena.

Main Skills Needed: *Communication Skills, Displays Strong Ethical Behavior*

- 1) *Communication* is the essential skill needed for project success. Strong written, verbal, and listening communication skills are the foundation of any relationship guiding the direction of a project. The ability of a leader to provide clarity in direction to her team through the use of technology, individual directions, and group discussions can be the difference between project success and project failure. A project can reduce its chance for success, such as being overbudget, late, or missing goals, based on communication problems.

Sharing important information to all stakeholders in a timely and clear manner is a critical success factor for any project. Open communication channels between leaders and team members allow for shared visions and ideas necessary for project success. Sharing information in a face-to-face channel is typically best, especially for sensitive communication. Two-way communication is timelier for all parties involved and more valued. This communication positively impacts not only project team members, but also clients and stakeholders.

Women should develop their skills in this area and become role models of communication excellence. This is done by an ongoing practice of being open, honest, and clear.

- 2) *Displaying strong ethical behavior*, being honest, is a second essential skill necessary for project success. Without ethics and honesty there is no support from stakeholders.

According to PMI (2017), "Responsibility, respect, fairness, and honesty are the values that drive ethical behavior for the project management profession as reflected in the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Project managers face decisions and ethical dilemmas every day. While project managers often know what to do, how to do it can become a challenge, and when stakeholder interests conflict, ethics enters the picture. Ethics is the discipline of how to do it best."

Ethics can be a valuable tool in the decision-making process, providing structure and guidance in project methods. Godbold, cited in Turner (2016), stated that ethics in projects and business might be an opportunity to differentiate oneself from the competition and to exploit competitive advantage. The idea of competitive advantage is valuable in the leadership opportunities for women and in the business environment faced by organizations today.

Ethical leadership is vital to any organization, all people, and project success. Some of the key areas that ethical leadership supports include: 1) attraction and retention of high quality employees (human resources); 2) attraction and retention of high quality projects (financial resources); and 3) goodwill from the community, competitors, and the government.

Littman and Littman (2017) concluded that ethical leadership is a critical form of leadership action. These actions lead to higher levels of productivity, stronger service quality, better quality decision-making, a more trusting environment, better communication, and increased flexibility from stakeholders. The leader's actions and the methods in which they are communicated are the stepping-stones on the path to project success. Without these actions, any project is more likely to have problems and issues on the route to completion.

Relationship Skills Needed: *Collaborating/Teamwork, Inspiring and Motivating, Developing Others*

- 1) *Collaboration/Teamwork* is highly valued as a skill today. People who drive organizations and their contributions toward goal attainment are noteworthy and valuable. Cooperation towards setting, discussing, and attainment of goals allows people to work together towards project success. People work better when they share the vision of a project. Team members whose ideas are valued have a sense of belonging. This turns into enhanced contributions, commitment, and ownership of actions, in turn leading to success.

Female leaders should always work closely with project teams for two-way communication towards success. This will allow for supportive decisions that will engage team members who feel they are contributing to meeting established project goals, and it will instill commitment to the successful outcome of the project.

- 2) *Inspiration/motivation* are the reason people do certain things. Motivation is an internal and external personal guiding force that pilots one's actions. It is the key reason a person acts and exhibits a level of contributions in specific ways. Allowing team members to focus on and use the most meaningful aspect of their skill set will enhance their personal motivation and contributions, thus leading to project success.

Female leaders should learn about their individual project team members, their motivation, and their goals. This personal linkage will lead to better relationships and enhanced success. It is always important to show team members appreciation for their contributions, via words of encouragement or tangible rewards.

3) *Developing others* is a key leadership goal for female project managers. Being supportive of others in their personal and career growth, and development of skills, is vital and necessary for current and future project success. Team members must have opportunities made available to them to enhance their skills, including coaching and mentoring team members to support their growth and development, providing training or increased responsibilities on a project, and providing opportunities for advancement. Using a structured career plan, evaluation plan, and review process, female leaders can enhance accomplishments of individuals and the organization through the growth shown by others.

Task Skills Needed: *Driving Results, Analyzing Issues, Solving Problems*

- 1) *Driving results*, including establishing project goals, project targets, and project outcomes, is the responsibility of a project leader. This task is developed while adding the structural issues and benchmarks, as well as the personal and team motivation, to complete the project. The project leader takes responsibility for the ongoing process and the final project results. Meeting the goals and having the trust developed in consultation with shareholders drives successful results. All stakeholders must have knowledge of the mission and support the vision for completion.

Issues that may impact results include cost and financial issues, legal and regulatory issues, human resource issues, time factors, and environmental threats that could impact the outcome of the project. Results are best met using the main skills of communication and ethical leadership actions to address and solve concerns. Results drive the plan, the deadlines, and the final outcomes. Women leaders can drive results by using their knowledge of the assignment and how they assign people to complete the project on time and on budget.

- 2) *Analyzing issues* allows a project leader to examine, in detail, the concern and problems that arise during the process of the project that may have an impact on the planned outcome. As mentioned previously, these issues can arise from multiple areas. The first step is to gather sufficient and appropriate data to clarify the issues of concern. This is best done by gathering data from records and involving stakeholders with relevant background knowledge. Using their feedback, while valuing different perspectives, is a useful tool in connecting all people to assist in clarifying the issues, with the goal of solving the problem. Female leaders can enhance their success by accurately and systematically using the expertise of relevant stakeholders to review the issues of concern.

- 3) *Solving problems* is accomplished by developing a plan of action after selecting the problem, analyzing alternative solutions, and selecting the best choice for a positive resolution. A project manager will encounter both small and large problems, routine and nonroutine complications, financial and human resource troubles, as well as problems that could impact completing projects on time, on budget, and in scope. Successful leaders will have the thinking skills and practice to confront problems and resolve those problems in a timely fashion. Female project leaders should develop a clear plan for problem solving that utilizes multiple strategies to review the challenges they encounter.

Conclusions

Women are important influencers and can have a positive impact on project management leadership. Since studies have shown women are as competent or more competent as leaders who are typically underrepresented in project management, it would be important to consider increasing the employment of female project managers for the sake of gender equity, ethical leadership, and project success. This is a strategy to reduce the opportunity gap for women and the continuing need to fill professional positions in project management.

Women should use their strengths in the following areas: strengths based on a two overriding main skills, followed by three relationship (people) skills, and three tasks (expertise) skills, that will assist in the leadership success of women project managers. The main skills needed to be exhibited by women leaders include communication skills and the ability to display strong ethical behavior. The major relationship skills required include collaboration/teamwork, inspiration/motivation, and the development of others. The major task skills needed include the driving of results, issue analysis, and problem solving.

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Littman also has a strong record of scholarship that supports his excellence in the classroom. He is an internationally recognized scholar and consultant who is often requested to collaborate with a European network of partners. He has participated in projects in the Netherlands, Latvia, and Germany. He has a long history of being a requested reviewer by journals and textbooks in a variety of business areas. He also has served his community as a two-term president of the Williamsville Central School District Board of Education and has served as a member of the Buffalo's Superintendent Advisory Council on Occupational Education.

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