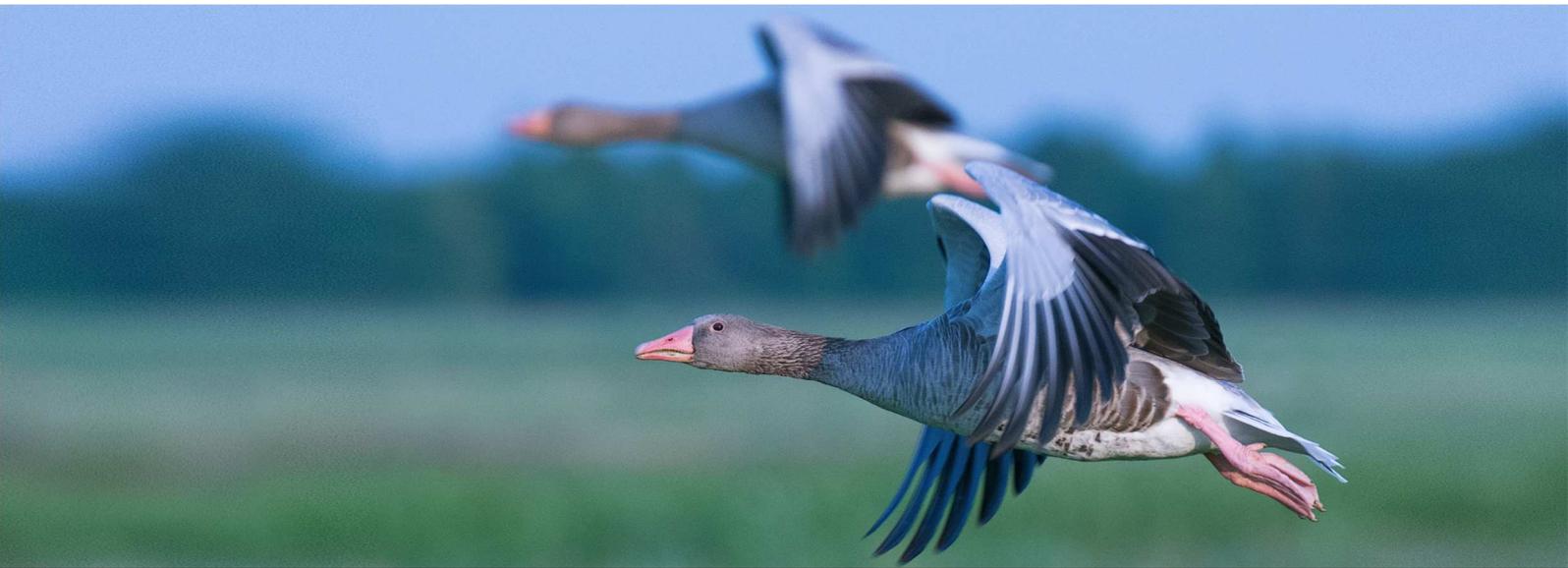

***Project Business Management*¹**

Followers Make Leaders

Oliver F. Lehmann²

“The fact is that followers are gaining power and influence while leaders are losing power and influence.”
— Barbara Kellerman³



Summary

Literature generally assumes that leadership is a form of skill, or a skillset, or possibly a mindset. People become leaders because they have these abilities, that others do not have, and by turning these others into followers. However, is it not a far more logical assumption that followers make leaders? And are “leadership skills” not rather the skills that prevent leaders, once chosen by followers, from failing?

¹Editor’s note: This series of articles is by Oliver Lehmann, author of the book *“Project Business Management”* (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis in 2018. See full author profile at the end of this article.

² Based on a chapter in Oliver Lehmann’s book *“Situational Project Management, the Dynamics of Success and Failure* (Lehmann, 2016)

³ (Kellermann, 2008)

What is Leadership?

It was on 11 August 1999, when a total eclipse of the sun was announced for major parts of Central Europe, including Munich, Bavaria, where I had a classroom training on that day. The eclipse was to happen about an hour after lunch time, so I made a decision with my students to stay longer after lunch break and watch the phenomenon together.

At the time of the eclipse, there were thick dark clouds hanging deep, and most people in Munich had no chance to actually watch it. All they saw was the world around them slowly getting dark, an evening just after lunch time, immediately followed by something similar to a morning. My students and I were however lucky. By chance, we happened to have a major hole in the clouds above the restaurant that the training company had booked for our lunchtime, big and stationary enough to see the eclipse from start almost to the end. So, we stayed a bit longer at our lunchtime places. We sat on the terrace of the “Michaelgarten” park restaurant, which has a nice vista over a little lake and a free sight into the sky. Just on time as forecast, the sun circle got dented, and this dent, the moon covering parts of the sun, became wider and wider.

On that day, some flocks of greylag geese flew over the park from West to East, and when the moon covered around 90% of the sun’s area, a flock of about 40 birds landed on the water of the lake. As geese generally do, they had followed a leader goose, probably on the way to a meadow, where they could graze, and this individual must have gotten confused by the slowly progressing disappearance of the sun. After the leader goose had landed on the lake, the other geese followed.

Swimming on the water, the geese were very noisy. The puzzling of their leader unsettled the other geese, and the impression was that they were frightened and did not know what to do. I had not known before, how much noise a flock of 40 scared geese can make. Approximately one raucous minute later, another group of geese flew over the lake. This flock was more than twice as large, and they flew in the same Eastern direction as the first groups. Their leader goose seemed not confused at all by the vanishing sun but instead flew ahead on its way, and so did its followers in the graceful V-shape order as geese normally do.

The frightened geese down on the lake reacted immediately. They started from the water, which made even more clamor when 40 pairs of wings flapped on the water, left the lake and each goose found its place behind the wing tip of another goose, a place which gives them the comfort of being securely guided and of reduced air drag⁴. They saw someone seemed to know the way, and preferred to follow the leader, which took a lot of distress from them.

I am not sure if anyone else in the Michaelgarten had observed this short episode of less than two minutes. People around me had their protection goggles on and watched the sky. I also did that too, of course, when this short intermezzo was over.

⁴ (Scott, 2005)

But the event remained in my mind, and over the years, I reflected on it more and more. Hasn't 1973 Noble prize awarded Austrian scientist Konrad Lorenz taught us to use geese behavior as a model for certain facets of human behavior? Humans are not geese, of course, but the dynamics between leaders and followers are probably quite common among different species. I concluded that an individual slips into the role not because he or she has been trained in specific leadership skills or has been placed in a powerful position, but because others become the impression that he or she knows the way, and that it is a good idea to follow on the way. The impression is often enforced or even caused by others, who already follow the leader. This signal may be wrong. It may be a factoid, but factoids can be powerful. Leadership in this understanding is more an expression of group behavior of the followers than of personal skills or traits of the leading person. It also shows the difference between an Alpha animal, which gets into the leading position by winning a series of power play-offs against others, and a leader in a narrower sense, who is in the position based on consensus of the followers. The consensus may be a result of swarm intelligence or swarm imbecility. Germany under Adolf Hitler between 1933 and 1945 is a good example for the second, and so are the other evil dictators of the 20th century, and all others before and after them. The impression that someone knows the way may be strong, but the followers may fail to notice how much the way is paved with blood.

Followers Make Leaders

Leadership as a position arranged more by the followers than the leaders? What about the effect on the leading individual? The followers are perceived as a confirmation for this person that he or she is doing something better than others. It is impossible to look into the mind of a goose, but it is imaginable that the leader of the second flock felt so much empowered by the large group behind him or her, that the vanishing sun came much less as something unsettling or threatening. The leader-geese's self-esteem and self-confidence or the feeling of being in charge of the geese behind were strong enough to manage the unusual situation. The confirmation that the individual in the leadership gets will enforce some behaviors more, those that the followers reward, and will weaken others that the followership ignores or even rejects. An additional imprinting effect may have the relationship with other leaders, which may be competitive, or collaborative or even true friendship, and also experiences of gains and losses during childhood. So many aspects influence a leader, but followers are the strongest.

Here is my definition: Leadership is the authorization to lead, given voluntarily by followers.

Without such authorization, many self-assigned leaders are either just bureaucrats in powerful formal positions or authoritarian oppressors. The authorization may be implicit by actions or explicit by elections, and the followers may be life-time devotees, who follow the leader tightly and absorb every word the leader makes, or made a more rational, distant, and temporary decision to follow the leader, something one would expect from members of most project teams. This definition reverses the causality in the dynamics of success and failure of leadership. Leaders become a far more passive part of the relationship than normally

assumed, their actions are not what makes them leaders, but they help followers to decide, whether they want the specific person to lead them or not. According to this definition, the true driving force in leadership are the followers. Strong leadership includes being a role model for the followers, but in this definition, the followers assign the role model function to the leader, rather than the leader telling the followers: "Follow my example."

Are leaders then just passive front runners, driven by the followers and possibly by some extraordinary fate into their role? Of course not. They are required to balance out the respect that their followers expect and, in their understanding, deserve, the positive confirmation of reward for efforts endowed by their followers, but also careful corrective feedback when necessary.

One of the greatest problem that leaderless organizations (and projects) are facing is the lack of an accepted leader, who praises employees and team members when they have done an outstanding job and celebrates their achievements in front of others.

Follower-Driven Leadership in Project (Business) Management

For project managers, standing still at a point of passivity would not be sufficient. Project managers are expected to be active drivers and agents of change, they are administrators of investments, and when we have been entrusted with the management of these changes, we have to develop impact on ourselves and on others. There is also rarely sufficient time to let the leadership role grow, project managers must get their teams up to productivity in short term. The leadership role has some confirmation for them and may be flattering, but is also uncomfortable, as it comes with expectations on behavioral self-control, something that may first needs to be developed, and on additional energy that can be called upon when required.

Examples of Project Teams

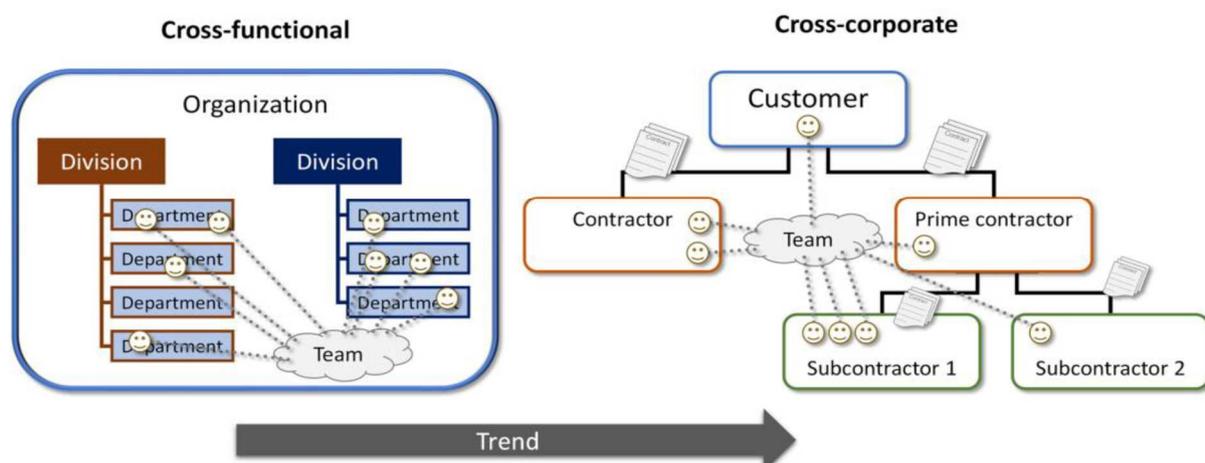


Figure 1: Cross-corporate projects bring together team members from different organizations.

This is even more difficult in cross-corporate project business⁵. The followers are not all members of the same organization. They come from different organizations, as shown in Figure 1, and they are expected to be loyal to their employing organizations and its specific business interests first before they can subscribe to the project's mission.

Time to build a team is scarce in these cross-corporate Project Supply Networks (PSNs), as all organizations and their people are expected to perform immediately. After a while, the people involved often “forget”, who their home organization is. The interpersonal and social bonds and possibly also the conflicts in the cross-corporate team dominate the formal links, and informal alliances and follower-leader relations develop. Often, these links are highly beneficial to the project, as they come with trust and rapport among the team members. Sometimes however, factions develop that disintegrate the project team.

And from time to time, a team member's home organization turns up and claims its birthright back, reminding the team member who sends the monthly paycheck. As project managers, keeping a “Mission Success First” paradigm alive can be challenging in these situations, though understanding the dynamics of success and failure in cross-corporate projects and having an eye on politics may help navigate the project to success.

Leading May be Exhausting

All geese in the V-formation have the comfort of the reduced drag behind the wing tip of the goose in front, except the leader⁶. When sometimes a requirement is made to become a “well-rounded project manager”, this does definitively not relate to the shape of the body but to the behavioral traits of the person. Along the projects that we lead, we also learn a lot about ourselves.

The ever-changing situations that we are facing teach us lessons on our strengths and weaknesses on technical, organizational, and interpersonal levels and on the preparedness of people to follow us on the way that we want them to go with us. The feedback that we get can be very direct: technical failure, over- or under-organization, misunderstandings, conflicts and also team attrition are often quick warning signs that the way we approach a situation and the character of this situation may not match. Sometimes, the feedback takes longer, when dilemmas are growing almost invisibly until they get the power to wreck our project, or when time bombs are placed in concealed locations, which remain inactive for a long time until they suddenly go off.

We also receive positive feedback through successes and the “Wow”s of impressed stakeholders. When these experiences tell us something about our own shortcomings, we will need to react. We may enhance the underdeveloped behaviors through training, possibly self-

⁵ (Lehmann, 2018)

⁶ It has been reported that on long distance flights, geese sometimes change the leader goose, when the flight work gets too exhausting for the individual.

training, to better be able master situations that we experience as especially difficult and challenging, or we accept our shortcomings and avoid situations, where possible, that we feel unable to manage. In all these achieving situations that we face, we will often have to protect the control that we have over our own professional destiny and that of our projects in collaborative environments. Ideally, we achieve this protection best by upholding our most profound personal assets: Empathy with stakeholders, authenticity, trustworthiness, integrity, situational intelligence and by knowing the team and the other stakeholders.

Finding Help

Once placed in a leadership position in cross-corporate project business, voluntarily or not, here are seven recommendations on how to address these challenges:

1. Know the contracts. Too often, project managers do not know the contract(s) with customer and contractors, which is the ultimate rule book in project business.
2. Ensure sufficient opportunity for on-boarding. Team members from other organizations require additional attention and assistance during this time.
3. Know the other organizations in the project and their people. Understand their business interests and investigate their culture.
4. Let the team agree upon the use of a common glossary. Projects in general suffer from misunderstandings that cause delays and distress and are costly to fix. In project business, the risk gets increased, as misunderstandings can have legal and commercial consequences on top of the damage on project management level. As a basis, the Project Business Glossary⁷ of the Project Business Foundation may come in handy. Feel free to expand it where necessary.
5. Bring third-parties in, when necessary. This may include auditors, mediators, and arbitrators, when the parties cannot resolve their problems alone.
6. Followers can turn people into leaders, but they can also reject the status again. Pay attention for early clues that followers become disappointed and remorseful.
7. Don't let the status that has been assigned to you change your self-perception. You are still as mortal as anyone else.

⁷ (Project Business Foundation, 2020)

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Oliver F. Lehmann, MSc, ACE, PMP, is a project management educator, author, consultant, and speaker. In addition, he is the President of the Project Business Foundation, the home association for professionals and organizations involved in cross-corporate projects.

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He has been a member and volunteer at PMI, the Project Management Institute, since 1998, and served as the President of the PMI Southern Germany Chapter from 2013 to 2018. Between 2004 and 2006, he contributed to PMI's *PM Network* magazine, for which he provided a monthly editorial on page 1 called "Launch", analyzing troubled projects around the world.

Oliver believes in three driving forces for personal improvement in project management: formal learning, experience, and observations. He resides in Munich, Bavaria, Germany and can be contacted at oliver@oliverlehmann.com.

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- ["Project Business Management"](#) (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis in 2018.

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