

Positive Leadership in Project Management ¹

Focusing on the Need to upskill yourself and your team ²

By Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow

Today's professional project manager knows that, by nature of the position he or she assumes a leadership role upon acceptance of any project assignment. This responsibility as a leader is complex and involves multiple roles. In many cases the responsibility is often not matched with the level of authority that is necessary to accomplish some project objectives or resolve project related issues. To meet this challenge the project manager, or more appropriately, the project leader, must call upon a specific set of skills to maneuver through the ever-changing project environment and the demands of a wide variety of stakeholders. Over time, and through many projects a project manager gains skills and experience and becomes more adept at dealing with the demands imposed by clients, sponsors, and other stakeholders. Experience is certainly important and has some value but developing skills and continued "upskilling" is most certainly necessary to remain successful. Especially in this time of uncertainty. (Has there ever been a time when there was no uncertainty?)

In today's changing project environment, significantly affected by the pandemic, an unpredictable and often "rocky" economy, rapidly changing technology and the emergence of virtual project teams as a business norm, traditional training may not be enough for a leader to stay ahead of the curve. According to an article in the March –April 2021 issue of the Harvard Business Review – *Reengineering the Recruitment Process*, the skills needed in many roles, especially leadership roles, are continually changing and the sources of talent are changing also. The skills needed to manage and lead today's businesses and their associated projects have an increasingly short shelf life. The reason for this, in part, is the much more frequent and often disruptive, technological breakthroughs. The pandemic drove many technology changes that significantly affected how leaders conduct business and guide their teams.

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. (2021). Focusing on the Need to upskill yourself and your team: Series on Positive Leadership in Project Management. *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue VIII, August.

Although a “new norm” in the business world has not really been defined, one new norm that has developed is the need to skillfully manage remote employees and virtual teams.

A leader must continually adapt to the environment and focus on improving acquired skills and adding new skills to maintain an edge as a world class leader. A world class leader is defined as having 6 specific qualities:

- Emotional Intelligence
- Honesty
- Compassion
- Decisiveness
- Dedication
- Responsiveness

These are not actually skills, they are behaviors that define the individual. The skills needed to compliment the leadership qualities are:

- Communication – speaking, listening, writing
- Results oriented – setting expectations and goals
- Basic leadership – Establishing vision, mission, and direction
- Team orientation – Building teams with diverse skills
- Influence – Selling ideas and persuading

To meet the challenges of today’s business and project environment, the project leader must become a world class learner. Leaders must invest in a defined path of personal and professional growth. In addition, it is also important for the project leader to take an interest and encourage the personal growth of their team members. There is a need to learn as a team and to collectively learn new skills faster. This is essential if the organization plans to sustain its competitive advantage. According to the Harvard Business Review article, a survey of 3500 managers found that only 29% of new hires have the skills required for their current roles. Consider that! What about future roles? Leaders have to be sure they have defined the skills needed by their teams to complete today’s business needs and also prepare their teams for future roles.

It is imperative for leaders to examine the current state of organizational knowledge and skill levels and plan a strategy for continuous upskilling and staff educational enhancement. Part of the leadership role is to anticipate the future needs of the organization and its clients and develop a winning strategy for the future.

From a leadership perspective, today’s environment requires leaders to adapt quickly, align their teams through common values, purpose, and a clear set of objectives. Leaders must create a sense of great opportunity within their organizations to attract the best talent and establish a desire for the team to work together toward shared aspirations.

To accomplish this, an organization's leaders must establish and demonstrate, through actions, a set of core values. These values may include, as an example:

- Respect for Individuals
- Dedication to helping customers
- Highest standards of integrity
- Innovation
- Teamwork

The core values will be different for every organization and, when established, they will define, at least to some degree, what skills will be needed to sustain those values and achieve the higher-level strategic goals of the organization.

There is certainly a need for planning, delegating, organizing, estimating, and other skills we associate with management but today there is a much greater emphasis on skills that will improve personal time management, productivity, the ability to influence others, the ability to break down barriers and remove conflicts, and to motivate teams to go that "one step further" to delight a customer and build the organization's brand. It is also important to have the ability to show sincere appreciation. At the top of the leadership skills inventory should be "skillfully providing praise or criticism." This is an area where many project leaders could use some further development. The leader should also be observant enough to know when the pressures on the team begin to take their toll and when to provide a lighter moment or break and "decompress" a team

Consider your skills in the following areas:

- Setting team and individual goals – clearly stating meaningful objectives
- Facilitating problem solving sessions
- Communicating bad news
- Delivering meaningful performance appraisals
- Matching assignments with competency and talent
- Setting clear expectations
- Listening to others (really listening)
- Sincerely recognizing and acknowledging outstanding work
- Creating a trusting environment that results in loyalty and commitment.
- Maintaining composure in a crisis situation

These are a few of the skills that many leaders possess, that could use some regular "sharpening."

Dr. Stephen R Covey defined “Sharpen Your Saw” is his book – Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” to be: *increasing your personal productivity*. Have a balanced strategy to renew yourself in the four aspects of life: Physical, Social, Mental, and Spiritual. We can relate Covey’s sharpen your saw habit to our own personal inventory of skills and plan to keep them “sharp.”

It is also important to anticipate new skills that will be required to remain effective. Many people are learning and acquiring new skills informally on the job or while working at home. There is an abundance of virtual learning programs available and team members should be encouraged to tap into those resources. Virtual teams are common in business today and they require leaders who have the ability to create a strong connection among the team members regardless of time zone, customs, language, and values.

The pandemic and the return to some level of “normal” business operations is challenging organizations to rethink traditional ways of doing business, to change their hiring practices, and create a new “playbook” for attracting and retaining talent.

The term “AGILE” is now common within most organizations. Let’s add to the AGILE concepts by adopting a new element – Learning Agility.

Assess your current talent pool, identify strengths and capitalize on them. Focus on opportunities and start addressing a “total market skills” approach for your organization. Identify where gaps may exist and plan your strategy for achieving world class performance.

About the Author



Frank P. Saladis

New York, USA



Frank P. Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow is the Owner/Founder of Blue Marble Enterprizes 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.

Frank can be contacted at saladismp@msn.com