A Socio-Political Perspective to Construction Project Leadership: History, Evolution, and Future[1, 2]

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Introduction

Leadership in project management is not one size fits all. It's not even a subject of preaching or best practices in isolation of the project environment. Leadership is a political feat requiring skills and abilities that can hardly be described in words or written in books. The best way to understand how leadership works, in reality, would be by reviewing human history. Leadership has evolved, developed, and largely matured over the ages. The evolution of project leadership can best be understood in the context of the socio-political conditions under which projects were built along with human history.

From the dawn of history and the stone ages down to recent eras of renaissance, enlightenment, and modernism.

"The evolution of 'Leadership in Projects and Programs'
can best be understood in the context of the evolution of the 'Socio-political Systems'
along the human history." Dr. Sherif Hashem, PMSA 2021

This article takes a look at the matter from that perspective. It presents three case study projects from three points in history and compares sociopolitical and leadership styles at each point. Namely, the stone age Step Pyramid in Egypt; the renaissance era Florence Dome in Italy; and, the industrial era Eiffel Tower in France. The idea came to my mind while writing my recent book titled "Greatness in Construction History" (in print). The article concludes with a look into the status quo and the future of project leadership.

[1] This article is based on a presentation by the author during the Project Management South Africa (PMSA) 2021 National Project Management Conference held virtually in November 2021. The PMWJ was a media partner for that event. To learn more about PMSA and their events, visit https://www.projectmanagement.org.za/. For more on the subject of this article, see the author profile at the end of this article and contact the author directly.

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The Step Pyramid Project - 2670 BCE

Figure 1: Pharaoh Djoser's Step Pyramid – Top right photo Pharaoh Djoser the project owner, the Bottom right photo Architect Imhotep the project leader

It's 2670 BCE in the deserts of Memphis, Egypt. The young and powerful pharaoh Djoser accesses the throne, full of energy and determination to make history. Imperial resources were huge, and so were the ambitions of the new pharaoh. As is common at the time, Kind Djoser's philosophy and first objective were to build himself a royal tomb, a pathway to heaven. He picked his genius vizier and polymath Imhotep for such an impossible feat, and the story began. The status quo in tomb construction was using mudbricks. Imhotep decided to challenge the status quo and use cut stones instead of mudbricks. The task seemed impossible due to the severe difficulty of cutting and handling stones. However, Imhotep, being himself a stone maker, knew that the task was doable so decided to proceed with stone. After all, laborer resources were unlimited, simply the entire nation, and stone quarries were just next to the construction site. The use of stones enabled Imhotep to go higher, much higher, with the tomb. The outcome was an unprecedented Step Pyramid reaching the heavens and penetrating the skies. When completed in 2650 BCE, as shown in Figure 1, Pharaoh Djoser's Step Pyramid was the highest building in the world. On the day of the inauguration, Pharaoh Djoser, his retinue, the entire nation, and the whole universe, went to Saqqara Necropolis to witness the celebration. At the end of the inauguration day, everyone went back home, and the glorious pharaoh went on and up to his eternal life using the step pyramid, the stairway to heaven. The night took over, and darkness and silence prevailed.

The Step Pyramid is the symbol, fruit, and crowning achievement of ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom era. The project's socio-political climate was obviously a perfect dictatorship

featured by a powerful king who owned the people and the country. The project leadership philosophy, as a result, was flat slavery combined with a dosage of spiritual motivation since the project was a royal tomb directly related to the worshiped Pharaoh.

The Florence Dome (il Duomo) Project – 1420 AD

Figure 2: Florence Dome and Cathedral - Top right photo Niccolò Machiavelli the project philosopher, the Bottom right photo Filippo Brunelleschi the project leader

It's 1420 AD in Florence, Italy. It's the year when the construction of the Florence Dome started. That's 53 years after completing the dome design. The secret behind such delay was that no one knew how to build it. Renaissance architects waited for a method and the cathedral waited for a miracle. This is when Filippo Brunelleschi came up with the method and the miracle. One man in each century is given the power to achieve greatness. A mythos was realized in the early 1400s AD in Florence Italy, and the man was Filippo Brunelleschi. Filippo was just a goldsmith and clockmaker, but with a genius mind, great interest in architecture, and passion for ancient Roman architecture.

The Florence Dome story began in 1296 AD, right in the middle of the Middle Ages. The political ruling system used methods similar to those described later on by Niccolò Machiavelli 1469-1527 AD in his iconic book The Prince. The cathedral was first built without a dome. The dome design was completed by Arnolfo di Cambio introducing a dome that's larger than any other dome in history, however, without telling how to build it. In 1367 AD, Opera del Duomo got the dome designed by Neri Fioravanti, still without telling how to build it. Several attempts were made by various builders to build the giant dome; however, all failed as the scaffolding collapsed every time. In 1418 AD, Opera del Duomo called for a competition to build the dome according to Neri's design, ironically,

this time without scaffolding, and Filippo Brunelleschi was the man. He placed his bid and fought for it until winning the job. For the next 16 years, Brunelleschi had to work hard under enormous pressure from the skeptical public and envious rivals. However, he did it and in 1436 AD delivered the spectacular dome and world wonder that is still standing high, stable, and proud until today, as shown in Figure 2.

The Florence Dome is the symbol, fruit, and crowning achievement of the Renaissance era. The project's socio-political climate was obviously a theocracy where the church is leading the show, backed by ambitious rulers looking for fame and might. However, the nation was longing for renaissance and freedom. The project leadership philosophy, as a result, was an overwhelming desire to go technical, hail science, and tell the world we are here.

The Eiffel Tower Project – 1887 AD

Figure 3: Eiffel Tower - Top right photo Jean Jacques Rousseau the project philosopher, the Bottom right photo Gustave Eiffel the project leader

It's 1887 AD in Paris, France. The nation is getting ready to celebrate the first centennial of its great revolution. The celebration had to be great and planned to host the 1889 AD World Fair. The World Fair monument had to be great. As great as France's history, and as high as France's profile and ambitions. That was the Eiffel Tower. Greatness made of iron. Made of confidence, pride, passion, and beauty. This is the story of the legendary Eiffel Tower, shown in Figure 3, born in Paris France in 1889 AD. Born to bring joy to life, and symbolize values of love, elegance, and freedom. Born to give life to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's revolutionary philosophy (1712-1778 AD) and the French Revolution's spirits of modernity and greatness.

The story began in 1884 AD with the French government's decision to celebrate the centennial of the French Revolution, due in 1889 AD. In 1886 AD, Gustave Eiffel, the brilliant French contractor, won a national competition to design a monument to support the World's Fair to be held in Paris in the same year of the centennial. The monument had to be as great as the French Revolution itself. Amidst opposition from haters and critiques, Gustave Eiffel and his brilliant team began the tower design and construction in early 1887 AD. When completed, the giant 324 m (1063 ft) high Eiffel Tower broke the world record becoming the tallest structure in the world, almost double the height of the Washington Monument. Greatness was felt in the air in the Champs de Mars Park where the tower was built, all over Paris, and indeed all over the world. The seductive ironwork tower standing on the verge of La Seine River in Paris has become the world's 'Symbol of Love', and romance.

The Eiffel Tower is the symbol, fruit, and crowning achievement of the Enlightenment era. The project's socio-political climate was obviously a democratic monarchy in which the ruling is constitutional and the society is free including media and civil organizations. The project leadership philosophy, as a result, was modern, sophisticated, innovative, and free including well-organized design-build project delivery and one of the earliest public-private partnerships.

Conclusion

Project leadership works in a wider overarching arena of social and political environments. It gets affected by such environments and varies to match them and take their colors. That goes for construction as well as most industries and business streams. Such axiomatic relationship is evidenced by history and can still be validated in today's world. Ancient theocratic monarchies can still be seen in the 21st century, and so do societies in the transition between dictatorship to democracy, and those who managed to cross the river to modernity and rule of law.

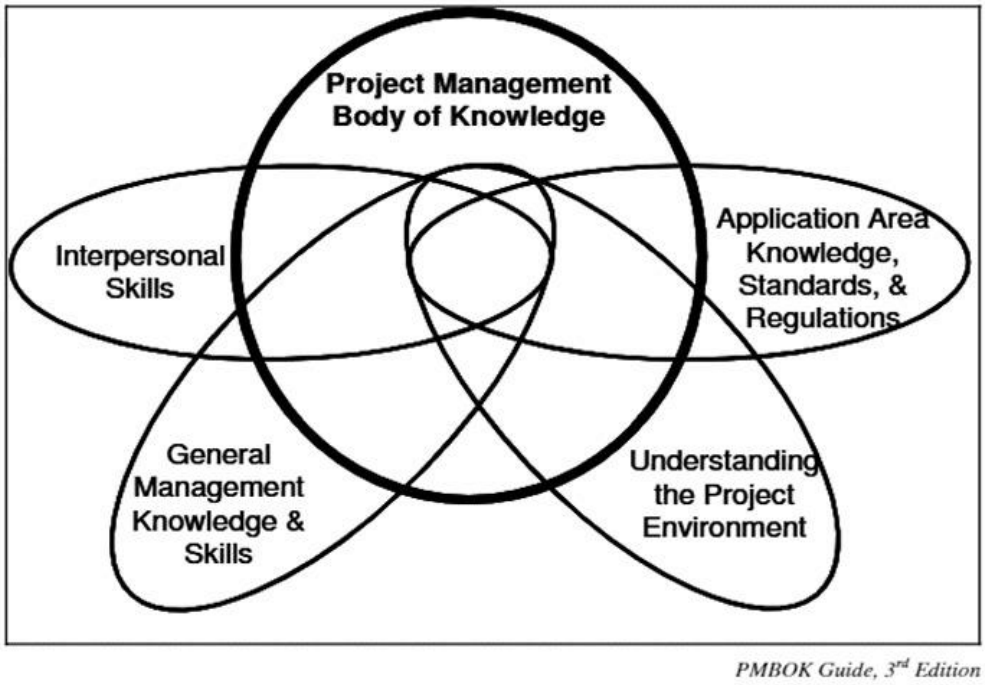
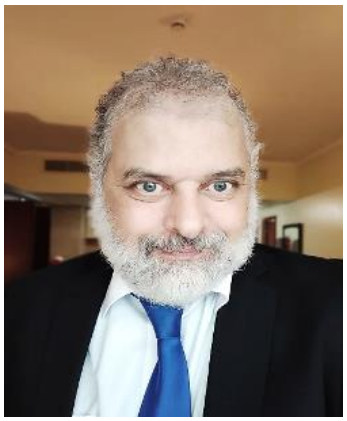


Figure 4: Project Managers Areas of Expertise – PMI PMBOK® Guide Third Edition

A key graph that's been sticking to my mind for years is that in Figure 4 published by PMI in the PMBOK® Guide Third Edition. The graph highlights five areas of expertise that need to be mastered by Project Managers to be able to deliver their roles effectively. One of them that keeps me thinking is 'Understanding the Project Environment'. I couldn't agree more.

About the Author



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