Balancing Leadership and Management in Projects [1, 2]

Christopher Worsley

Leadership in projects has come into sharper focus over the past few years. A sensible balance between management and leadership has long been identified as necessary for many traditional projects. Current practice and theory in project management suggest a rethink is needed. For example, the PMI BoK has made the case that management and leadership roles may be best situated in different roles and people within a project. Others have introduced the concept of servant-leadership, an interesting and unusual inversion of taking responsibility for decision-making

I agree that it is time to re-examine leadership in the context of projects, but first, let's examine why it matters. What is the difference between management and leadership? Here are some views:

The difference between management and leadership

> "Management is about arranging and telling. Leadership is about nurturing and enhancing. "

> "Leaders inspire people to want to do something. Managers hold people accountable for doing something. "

You can see from this brief sample that leadership is exciting, while management – not so much!   Perhaps projects, work entities designed to create often innovative solutions requires a visionary approach and not the dead hand of structure and discipline? Having 30 years of project management experience behind me, I believe John Kotter got it right. He asserted that:

"The real challenge [in project management] is to combine leadership and management and use each to balance each other"

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[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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Commentary

So how can project managers do this? What does it mean to be a leader, and when should you practice leadership rather than management?

Leadership in Projects

Projects have always been my first love because of the way they compress and accentuate classic management scenarios. In a single day, a project manager may be faced with making significant strategic decisions and, moments later, complex tactical actions. In a week, they may have to resolve technical, resource, and calendar time problems. It's a great life if you like stress. And so it is for leadership.

The functions and abilities of a leader in a project context are tested in three different circumstances.

First, project managers need to be able to manage and regulate themselves. Anger, stress, and other behaviours must be internally channelled to deliver the project objective and not disrupt performance to satisfy personal gains.

Second, there is a continuing need to manage one-on-one interactions with team members, stakeholders, and other resource owners, influencing and collaborating with them to produce the outcomes the project manager needs.

And, of course, there is a need to lead in the more traditional sense of getting others in a group to follow or at least accept that what you want is what they want.

These three types of leadership, personal, private, and public, were identified and described by Scouller in 2011. His paper is a good read for project managers.

TheThree-P Model of Leadership

Personal leadership
- Technical & psychological mastery
- The development of presence

Private leadership
- Providing individual purpose
- Providing feedback
- Developing the individual

Public leadership
- Setting the vision, maintaining focus
- Organizing and empowering people
- Decision making, issue resolution
- Ideation, problem solving
- Execution, energising action reviewing actions
- Building groups: Out in front
- Building groups: In the group

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Management: structuring tasks, allocating resources, monitoring, and controlling systems are all necessary but often not sufficient. Leadership is also needed to deliver most projects. What is the appropriate leadership depends on the team's and individuals' performance and development needs? Adapting leadership styles – called situational leadership –demands us to consider factors such as team capability and the threat to achieving the project's outcomes. It makes demands on all three Ps.

So, a project manager has both management and leadership responsibilities but cannot provide all of the leadership. It matters where some forms of leadership come from. It would be inappropriate, for example, for the project manager to be the visionary leader for a project or programme.

Project Types and Leadership

To determine the best management and leadership combination for a given project, it is helpful to look at the characteristics of the project. These can be typified as:

- Run the business projects or "fix-it" projects. There are usually many of these in an organisation, and their purpose is to remove errors or make minor but significant improvements to an existing offering. They don't create new or extra capability, except in a trivial sense, and do not cause peoples' jobs or roles to change.
- Grow-the-business or capability improvement projects. These projects impact the way things get done. They change people's jobs and roles and create or enable additional capability, but they are not "game-changers" in the way transformation projects are.
- Transformational change or programmes. These are all about "doing-it-differently". These projects change, often radically, the way things get done. They change not only jobs and roles but culture and attitudes. They introduce new, rather than changed, organisational capabilities

The nature of the projects changes the way governance should be conducted.

To remind us, governance is a **management process** to ensure:

> *The best decisions are made by the **right people** at the **right time** using the **right information**. And these decisions are reflected in the way projects are conducted.*
>
> **Right people** – in projects, are those people who have a legitimate part to play in the conduct of the project – partly we can tell this from the roles assigned, but in more complex projects, it gets trickier.
>
> **Right time** – a common approach to establishing the right time for decisions to be made is to set up stage-gates.
>
> **The right information** – what is the right information? Ultimately, that is determined by its relevance to the stakeholders' ability to make correct decisions – an uncomfortably circular argument, but nevertheless valid.

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While governance is a management process, when it gets complicated, leadership has to step in. What risks are we prepared to bear; how best can we ensure appropriate engagement with legitimate stakeholders; what information is sufficient and appropriate?

Project management methods, in the main, are silent on leadership in the governance of projects. The only guidance that works is that the governance approach should reflect the project's needs and the level of risk and control that the organisation's leaders believe appropriate. That decision, and the way it is provided, is why leadership is required.

And the more complex the projects -the more leadership, of each of the three types, must play a role in the successful execution of projects.
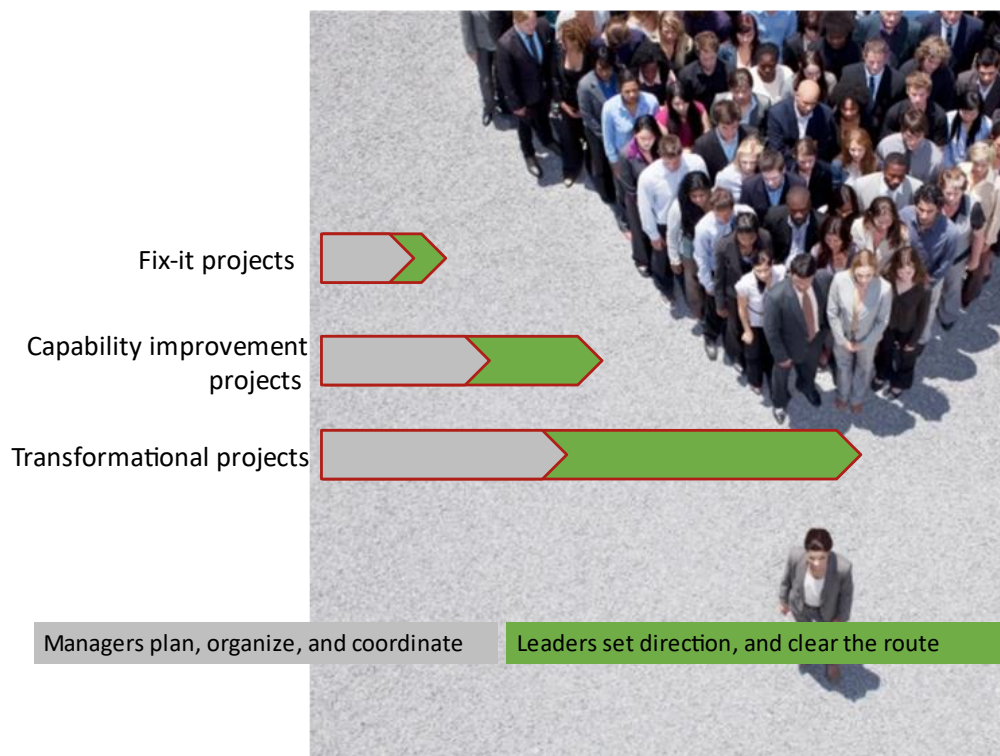
The Management-Leadership Challenge

The challenge for project managers is to choose an appropriate mix of management and leadership. Different types of projects demand different levels of management and procedural control. Fix-it projects traditionally were best managed by structuring the work environment into tasks. Sprints and scrum masters commonly structure the work by team capability. (The role of leadership in this circumstance typically involves personal and private leadership capabilities.)

As projects get more complex, the demands for leadership, and different types of leadership, from the project manager, the sponsor, and senior management roles, increases, until, for the most complex projects, transformational projects and programs, leadership dominates.

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About the Author

Christopher Worsley

Cape Town, South Africa

Christopher Worsley was the CEO of CITI from 1991 until 2019. CITI is a UK company dedicated to developing organisational and personal capabilities in project and program management.

He now lectures in the University of Cape Town's Masters' programme on project management and provides coaching and consultancy support to several organisations in South Africa.

Christopher has been involved in project and programme management for over 45 years. He has managed or supported several major transformation programmes and has been a programme architect and a lead assessor on programme assurance teams.

With his wife, Louise, he has published two books on planning: *Adaptive Project Planning* and *The Lost Art of Project Planning* (published by Business Expert Press in 2019).

For more, visit www.pi3learning.com; he can be contacted at cworsley@pi3learning.com