

Improving servant, transformational and emergent project leadership through proximal development^{1, 2}

By Tim Kloppenborg and Jesse Maleszewski

Project demands are different now. Customers demand faster, better and cheaper – not one or two of them. Knowledge workers do not respond to command and control but expect a voice in their work. Significant portions of many projects are contracted out to various vendors and suppliers. Due to these changes, demands on project leaders are different.

We first remind the reader of the Hershey Blanchard model of situational leadership. Then we introduce three types of leadership that are needed on any project which correspond with the last three stages of that model. Then we demonstrate how to improve all three types of leadership using a proximal development approach.

Situational leadership suggests that depending on the maturity of the follower, the leader may use telling, selling, participating or delegating to get workers to work most effectively. Old style command and control project management primarily used telling workers what to do without the workers having much say. This is still needed sparingly on some projects – especially when time is critical, and the team is prepared to follow orders immediately. However, on most projects and in most situations, we have moved beyond “telling” and the other three styles of leadership are more effective.

The three leadership styles we will develop here are servant (for selling), transformational (for participating), and emergent (for delegating). If our projects and organizations are to be effective, we cannot depend on one powerful leader telling everyone else what to do. We need active leadership from many participants. All three of these assume basic technical task competence or the leader would still need to be very directive.

¹ This article is based on a presentation by the authors 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 profiles at the end of this article and contact the author directly.

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The **servant** leader's primary goal is to help people do their work. A servant leader leads by facilitating – putting the needs of the followers first. Servant leaders practice shared management, collaboration, and enhancing the respect given to everyone. They understand that those who serve, also grow. The typical question they ask is “what gets in your way and how can I help you with it?”

Take the example of an arboretum development project, there may arise questions about how to interpret gray areas in governing policies and so a wise servant leader will ensure all key stakeholders actively participate in creating and updating a master plan; ensuring that the answers to the questions as to the governing policies have clear responses by seeking out or facilitating the frustrating process of securing said clear response. The servant leader will ensure that any hindrance to the successful completion of the arboretum is their focus and will work diligently to remove those obstacles.

The **transformational** leader's primary interest is achieving the project goals. A transformational leader leads by vision - speaking with authentic passion about the great accomplishments that will be achieved together. The vision describes successful outcomes for stakeholders and inspires collaboration with them and with all people working on the project. The leader then acknowledges the needs of each teammate and helps each understand how their work and personal desires align with this vision.

For example, a leader developing a new arboretum listening to stakeholders may help distill the vision as creating a tree museum while promoting native species for their posterity. Then discussions with participants would center on how each can contribute to that vision and gain something each personally desires in the process – thus connecting their desires with the transformative project vision. As the ancient Greeks remind us, “A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit.”

The **emergent** leader's primary goal is helping people improve. An emergent leader leads by influence and values. They recognize active involvement and even leadership by many is a key to success. Much of this leadership is informal with different people leading at different times. The goal is to encourage teams to self-organize; to identify and encourage those who could lead on topics within their sphere of knowledge; and to promote a bias for action. These member leaders often emerge when they feel they can control, or at least influence, outcomes. A culture of trust, transparency, and flexibility is necessary to allow this flourishing.

In our arboretum example, many participants may feel intimidated as some participants have formal credentials such as certified arborist or landscape architect. An emergent leader needs to create the fun and supportive atmosphere where all can feel their ideas will be respectfully considered.

Emergent leaders empower their workers to become leaders within their expertise. These new emergent leaders need to be willing to lead, allowed to lead, and supported while leading. One must help them overcome a reluctance to step forward. This can include helping them develop confidence and it can include changing the culture of the organization to not only allow but encourage people at all levels and in all positions to engage with a bias for both expressing their thoughts to be thought leaders, but also to act. We want these emergent leaders to lead both themselves in their actions, but also others. We want them to be invested in their work (engaged in the Gallup language). Supervisors need to act and not just talk to encourage this. By helping others become leaders, the more established leaders improve their own leadership abilities. An established leader who is developing emergent leaders thinks like a successful consultant. The consultant is needed to both teach new methods and develop new skills in an organization and work themselves out of a job as the members of the organization become capable enough that they no longer need that guidance or roll filled externally.

One way to consider emergent leadership is to think of an organization like a garden. Different workers are like different plants. The goal of the gardener is to enable each plant to reach its potential and to contribute to the overall garden. A tomato plant should grow delicious tomatoes and also be tall enough to provide shade to inhibit weed growth. Rabbits love to eat in gardens and could destroy the tomato plant, so a gardener may plant marigolds to provide a smell rabbits detest to keep the rabbits away. The marigolds also provide beauty. The gardener is interested both in growing a good crop now and also in improving the soil to grow better crops in the future. Likewise, a project leader wants to help each worker improve so they can do their job and to create an atmosphere where future leaders will thrive, so those future leaders can help others do their jobs and become leaders in their own right. The focus is both on the present and the future.

These leadership approaches can be fostered using proximal development. This means finding a graduated zone for each member that stretches them beyond what they have previously done, but in a manner that allows them to connect their improving skills to what they already know. Only covering things which a person already knows is a mistake and people languish if they do not get to enhance their skills by stretching themselves. Likewise, covering things that in no way

connect to the current knowledge, skills, or competencies will give the person no chance to learn as they have no reference; leading to frustration and burnout.

A supervisor and worker together find specific elements of transformational, servant, or emergent leadership that will be useful in their role; determine how much improvement is realistic at each point in time; and determine how to assess that improved behavior. The more congruence there is between the perceptions of the supervisor and the worker of their current capabilities, the more effective proximal development becomes. Working on one or two things at a time with guidance from a supervisor, workers can improve their leadership skills and further help their projects succeed. We now show a handful of the many beneficial behaviors that constitute each of these types of leadership. We show an entry level, middle level, and higher-level skill for each.

Leadership Approach:

Servant	Behavior	Low	Medium	High
	Co-develop	Provide Input	Actively Debate	Encourage Teammates
	Ask for help	Seek help	Pursue success Together	Support and Trust others
	Give respect	Show respect	Develop confidence In teammates	Respectfully challenge Teammates
Transformational	Behavior	Low	Medium	High
	Vision	Describe Vision	Connect work to vision	Help others connect their Work to vision
	Feedback	Accept Feedback	Act on feedback	Proactively Seek feedback
	Stakeholders	Show Respect	Collaborate with stakeholders	Secure acceptance

Emergent	Behavior	Low	Medium	High
	Improvement	Share lessons Learned	Actively Improve	Work with teammates To improve
	Encourage	Suggest Plan ideas	Suggest ideas based on facts	Value ideas of others
	Transparency	Openly Communicate	Improve face-to-face communication	Celebrate others' ideas

We encourage each of you to work with your supervisor to select one or two leadership behaviors for you to improve and with those who report to you to select one or two leadership behaviors for each of them to improve. Jointly determine which behaviors will be most useful both for the success of your project and for the development of each of you as individuals. Jointly develop a plan for how to practice this developing competency; when to provide feedback (early and often); and how you will assess the improvement.

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