

THE GROWTH OF PROACTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP¹

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LEADERSHIP: THE EARLY YEARS

For almost 60 years, perhaps the biggest challenge facing organizations was deciding what leadership style would be best for project management practices. In the early years of project management, leadership was defined almost always in terms of the project manager's authority and power. Most project managers had technical backgrounds, and the authority they used was centered around the technical decisions that had to be made. The project charter usually identified the authority given to the project managers and the types of decisions they were allowed to make. Senior management prepared the charters and wanted to be sure that the project managers did not have the authority to make any decisions that were supposedly reserved for senior management or project sponsors.

The second component of the project manager's leadership style was the use of power. Power was often described as the ability to influence members of the workforce. Most project management textbooks identified five commonly used types of power:²

- *Legitimate power.* The ability to gain support because project personnel perceive the project manager as being officially empowered to issue orders.
- *Reward power.* The ability to gain support because project personnel perceive the project manager as capable of directly or indirectly dispensing valued organizational rewards (i.e., salary, promotion, bonus, future work assignments).
- *Penalty power.* The ability to gain support because the project personnel perceive the project manager as capable of directly or indirectly dispensing penalties that they wish to avoid; usually derives from the same source as reward power, with one being a necessary condition for the other.
- *Expert power.* The ability to gain support because personnel perceive the project manager as possessing special knowledge or expertise (that functional personnel consider as important).

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² Kerzner, H., (2025), *Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling*, John Wiley & Sons Publishers, P.250-251.

- *Referent power.* The ability to gain support because project personnel feel personally attracted to the project manager or his project.

Although organizations had good intentions in defining leadership in terms of authority and power, as seen in Figure 1, there were several obstacles that impeded successful project management leadership practices. First, project managers had virtually no say as to which functional employees would be assigned to their projects. Functional managers made the majority of the decisions. Second, project managers did not possess the authority to remove non-performing functional employees from their projects without permission of the functional managers.

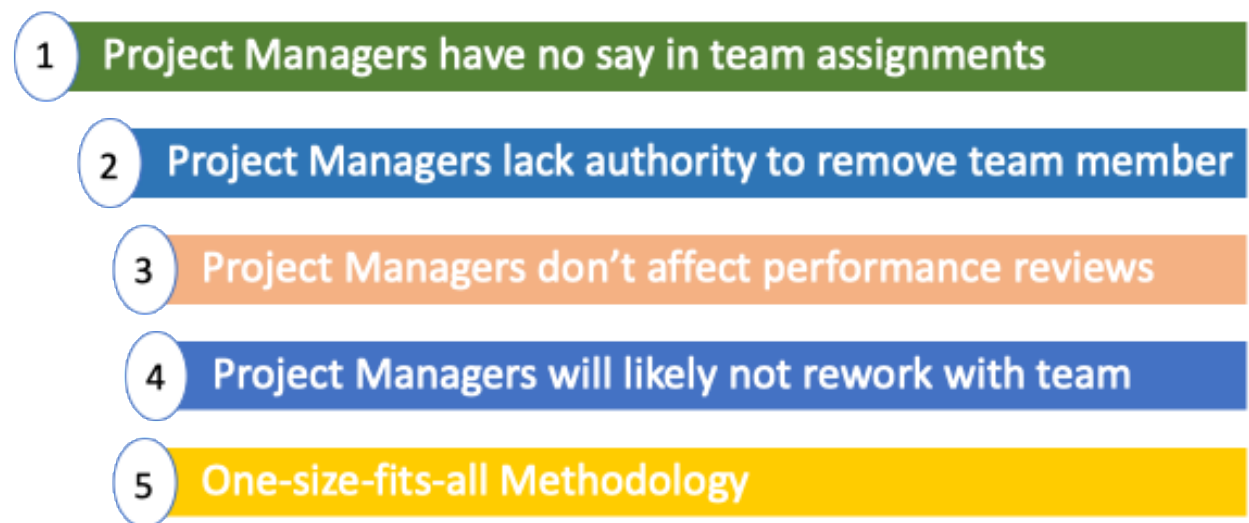


Figure 1 – Project Management Leadership Obstacles

Third, and perhaps the most serious roadblock, was that most project managers often had no input into the performance reviews of the team members. Fourth, most of the projects were short-term, and the project manager might never work with these people again. Fifth, most companies used a one-size-fits-all methodology for all projects and leadership was believed to have the right to “force” compliance and use of the tools in the methodology. These five obstacles significantly impeded the project manager’s leadership ability.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP

Given the fact that many projects were short-term, and the project managers might never work with these people again, there appeared to be little need to focus on the types of project management leadership that would be best. Emphasis was placed upon producing the deliverables required and then finding another project to manage. Project

leadership was oriented to what was in the best interest of the project manager rather than the project or the team.

By the turn of the century, the importance of project management leadership began to grow. Some of the factors that encouraged more research into project management leadership included:

- Project were getting longer, and project managers were expected to interface more closely with team members. Engaging team members for the duration of the project, rather than just at project initiation, had become important.
- Clients and stakeholders had become more knowledgeable in project management and wanted greater participation in project management practices. Collaborating with stakeholders was no longer the responsibility of just the project sponsor.
- The growth of flexible methodologies such as Agile and Scrum focused on a greater need for collaboration between project managers and stakeholders.
- More projects were being implemented with greater uncertainty and risk that required a leadership style that could alleviate the additional stress placed upon the workers.
- Written status reports did not always provide a clear picture of true status and downstream issues that should be considered.

There were several leadership styles that project management researchers looked at, such as:

- Authoritarian leadership
- Participative leadership
- Laissez-faire leadership
- Task-oriented leadership
- Behavior-oriented leadership
- Situational leadership

All leadership models carried advantages and disadvantages.

PROACTIVE VERSUS REACTIVE LEADERSHIP

For more than two decades, the words “reactive” and “proactive” were used almost exclusively in project management when discussing risks and risk management rather than project leadership. Reactive risk management focused on firefighting to mitigate the damage of the risk after the risk materialized. Proactive risk management included the preparation of a risk register at the start of a project to identify the risks that might arise, and how the team would then handle the risks if they occurred. Proactive risk management was based upon forward thinking and anticipation of risks. Both proactive

and reactive risk management focused on problems and risks rather than on issues that might benefit the company in the future.

Proactive implies thinking ahead. Unfortunately, many companies believed that project managers were not paid to think, but to follow a plan that may have been prepared by perhaps someone other than the project manager. Organizations created a one-size-fits-all methodology and project managers were evaluated during performance review sessions on how well they followed the forms, guidelines, templates, and checklists in the methodology. Senior management feared that project managers might want to make decisions reserved for the executive branch and having them simply following the established project management processes would be best. If forward thinking was necessitated, it was most likely performed by the senior managers that was functioning as the project sponsors. Project managers were paid to follow and obey rather than think ahead and be creative.

PROACTIVE THINKING GROWS

As we entered the 21st century, there were several changes that occurred in project management that necessitated a much closer look at project leadership styles. As reflected in Figure 2, many of these changes meant thinking differently. **First** and foremost, companies recognized that project management was becoming a business process and that organizations were managing their entire business by projects. Project managers were now allowed to make business as well as technical decisions. The relationship between project management and strategic planning was becoming evident. Project management was now a strategic competency because of its increased level of importance rather than just another career path opportunity.



Figure 2 – Changes in Thinking

<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/stock-exchange-risk-taking-winner-6993789/>

Second, project success was no longer defined in terms of the triple constraints of time, cost, and scope. Success was measured in terms of business benefits and value created for both the contractor, client, and stakeholders. Project managers were expected to continuously look ahead as to what can be done on projects to increase business benefits and value not just for the parent company, but for their clients as well.

Third, when project problems occurred in the past, project managers were expected to follow standard project management practices for resolution or escalate the problem to the sponsor for resolution. Now, project managers recognize that looking at problems correctly, even projects that were in trouble could result in business opportunities in the future based upon how the problem is resolved. Problems can be opportunities if managed correctly.

Fourth, companies have a desire to expand their businesses and grow. This requires funding more projects that require design thinking efforts. Proactive thinking and leadership are necessary for creativity and innovation during project management practices.

APPLICATIONS FOR PROACTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP _____

Areas where proactive project management leadership efforts may produce the greatest benefits by anticipating future events include:

- Team meetings
- Collaboration with stakeholders
- Developing a communication plan
- Risk management practices
- Engaging team members
- Walk-the-halls project management
- Allocation of critical resources

Extracting ideas from team members that can benefit the company is often challenging. Team meetings provide excellent opportunities for proactive project management leadership practices. Sending out an agenda prior to the meeting tells people what will be discussed. People should be encouraged to come with possible issues they may expect in the future and ideas for how the solutions will take place. Team members should also be encouraged to look ahead and think about business opportunities because of the work they are doing on the project. Proactive leadership practices encourage workers to speak and state their opinions and ideas without being criticized. If the ideas are beneficial to the companies, workers must believe they will be credited for their ideas.

Meetings with stakeholders are another opportunity for proactive thinking and leadership. The meetings allow you to better understand the long-term needs and interest of the stakeholders. The definition of project success is not simply delivering a product or

service to a client. Success is when the client and stakeholders trust you and your company enough to treat you as a lifetime strategic partner.

Stakeholders and clients often do not put into writing their thoughts about the future and possible opportunities with your company. Meeting with them one-on-one often builds trust and leads to opportunities. Project managers must focus on the long-term interests of their stakeholders and clients rather than just providing a deliverable to one project. This is a critical component of proactive leadership practices.

The most important word in proactive project management leadership is **communication**. As stated in the first two examples, effective collaboration with team members and stakeholders are the building blocks for trust. Establishing a project communication plan should be mandatory on all projects. It lets people know that their concerns will be heard and encourages them to provide early identification of problems as well as opportunities. The communication plan must encourage early identification and anticipation of any downstream risks that may appear and need resolution.

Team members usually have many great ideas about opportunities and challenges. Proactive leadership must build trust to the point where they feel free to discuss their concerns with the project manager. This may occur in team meetings or when the project manager adopts a walk-the-halls leadership approach. Multiple approaches should be used to build trust because some team members feel much better discussing their concern in one-on-one sessions with the project manager than in team meetings.

Projects are getting longer rather than shorter. Workers are now assigned for a longer period on some projects. Proactive leadership helps identify stress and anxiety that workers may be subject to and prepare plans to alleviate the stress, chaos, and damage that may happen.

Project managers must have a reasonably good understanding about the skill levels of the assigned team members and any issues they may have performing their required tasks now or in the future if the direction of the project changes. Projects that require innovation and creativity may necessitate workers with specific skills. Proactive leadership helps identify skills needed in the future. It also makes workers aware of what expectations you may have of them as the project progresses.

THE PATH FORWARD

Proactive project management focuses on curiosity, is anticipatory and deals with problems and issues before they happen. Proactive leadership is heavily based upon the development of backup plans that can be implemented quickly when and if problems occur. Proactive leadership requires that project managers do not look negatively at risks and potential issues but instead see them as potential opportunities.

This proactivity requires investment in building the right organizational culture that supports experimentation and enhances the risk appetite for tomorrow's leaders. The risk with proactive project management is that it may lead to overplanning the project. Reactive project management will always still exist, and the project manager must find the correct balance between proactive and reactive project management leadership. Having emphasis on building the right experience-driven organizational culture, will enhance the opportunity of finding this balance. Tomorrow's project management leaders will utilize this proactivity to strengthen their resilience and adaptability. When coupled with the right level of AI augmentation, this will build the leadership qualities that will reward thinking again for a change and make proactivity a strong muscle in the project teams' communications arsenal.

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Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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Dr. Al Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his empathy, engineering insights, and collaboration strengths to successfully envision new business models and execute complex missions across diverse cultures globally.

In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the \$40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

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