

The Project Manager as a Leader

by Michael Ellegood, P.E., PSMJ Resources Consultant

Fact: The most sought-after people in the highly successful consulting firm are the most effective project managers. In fact, the leading consulting firms are highly “project manager-centric”. As a senior executive in one of these international firms years ago, I distinctly recall the chief executive officer of the firm lining up the management of the company to make clear that the project manager was the vanguard of the organization and that our mission was to support the PM in the project delivery effort. That statement, that notion, that philosophy clearly identifies the project manager as a leader in an organization.

But, what then is a leader and how does that differ from being a strong manager?

There are a number of soppy little sound bites all partially true but all amazingly shallow: “A leader does the right thing, the manager does things right; you manage things, you lead people,” etc., etc. The statements are correct— just astonishingly incomplete in advising the emerging leader— how to make the transition from doer to leader. Let’s examine some truisms about leadership.

Definition: a commonly accepted definition of leadership is “*the art of motivating a group of people to act towards achieving a common goal.*” So then a project manager in most consulting organizations must motivate a group of people, most of whom don’t work directly for the project manager and most of whom have other work activities of varying priorities to accomplish their part of a project for which the project manager will get all the credit. No small task.

On top of that, the project manager typically is not a subject matter expert in all of the disciplines associated with the project, there is often a demanding client and internally there are typical pressures from so-called “support staff” (the HR and financial folks). And even a project principal who, like Halley’s Comet, comes in from outer space, makes an orbit or two then exits at light speed back into the cosmos, all the while charging to the project.

Leaders are made, not born. While all of us have heard the phrase, “So-and-so is a born leader” in fact, there is no such thing. Some folks have innately good communication skills; some others are blessed with intelligence, appearance or other outward trappings of a leader but everyone must learn to take their individual talents, skills, and experience and effectively focus them on a single objective, communicate effectively, motivate the technical team while tracking schedule, budget and scope. Normally, this will mean subordinating personal preferences desires and even needs for the good of the project and the project team.

Leadership is developed by leading. While there are a number of books, journals, training courses, coaches, and resources out there, one learns to become a leader by leading. That means seeking the risks associated with being in a leadership role, perhaps even volunteering, if necessary, to lead a group even if the task at hand may not be the most glamorous and visible. For example, leading the annual office charity drive is certainly not the high-visibility assignment guaranteed to propel one into the corner office but it is a task that requires motivating

others (to contribute money), communicating (the need for the charitable contribution) inspiring confidence, (that the effort is worthwhile and the money will be well spent) all fundamental and essential skills of the leader.

Leadership means taking risk. When an individual assumes a leadership role, the individual accepts the risk of the outcome. This simply means that when you take on the role of the leader you will, by definition, be responsible for the outcome of the task. If the project goes over budget, or it's late or the client hates it, it's yours, buddy! You are also assuming the risk of others. If a sub fails to deliver, you own it. If the office manager assigns old Fred to your project who has the reputation of not doing much except filling out his time sheet, you have a whole new challenge, but you still own the project.

Leaders will fail. Taking risk means that failure will sometimes occur. Walt Disney, the world-renowned innovator, pioneer, and a leader in the motion picture industry as it was developing, often failed. In fact, he went bankrupt twice before he finally made it. A successor CEO of the Disney Corporation, Michael Eisner, known for being a strong, intense, and sometimes abrasive manager is quoted as saying "At Disney, we feel that the only way to succeed creatively is to fail." This means that as part of the Disney culture they encourage people to be creative and to try new ideas without fear of criticism should they fail. The key here is to recognize the signs and indicators of pending failure and change course before the project tanks *and* to learn from mistakes so that they can be corrected. As an old friend and mentor of mine once said, "It's not a sin to get fleas, it is to keep them."

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