

LEADERSHIP ISSUES INVOLVED IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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No matter how gifted you are professionally, if you find it hard to work with people, you will never be a good project manager. It is well known that a great deal of a project’s success depends on the way the people in the team perform – and the project manager plays a central role in this. It should be commonsensical that Project Management is not a purely technical discipline conducted in some dark corner of an office building. An important part of the role the manager plays involves establishing effective relationships with a wide range of people and maintaining them even in sometimes challenging circumstances. A key saying for this domain could therefore be: project managers manage first and foremost people, not papers or activities.

Keywords: project management; leadership skills; team building.

Generally speaking, in the specific literature in the domain, *leadership* and *management* are terms widely used and many times – although mistakenly – interchangeably, although there are recognized differences between them. The most common view is that a *leader* focuses on long-term goals and final objectives and makes plans, at the same time inspiring people to reach those goals. A *manager* often deals with the daily activities in order to meeting specific, short-term goals. More often than not project managers need to be both leader and manager. Good project managers must be aware of the needs and requirements of the stakeholders and organizations involved in their projects, so they must be visionary in guiding these projects and even suggesting future ones. However, they must do this while paying attention to the details and daily tasks, being organized and effective. Above all, good project managers must concentrate on and aim at achieving positive results. The present paper refers to the specific qualities and the acquired skills, fundamentally necessary for a project manager to do his – her job properly, in the best circumstances, at the same time obtaining the best results.

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Obviously, each project has its particular character, but there are skills which may be important in all projects. First of all, the project manager should possess general management knowledge and skills. Secondly, they should be able to understand important topics related to financial issues, accounting, sales, marketing, contracts, logistics, strategic planning, tactical planning, operations management, organizational structures and behavior, personnel management. These include understanding change and understanding how organizations work within their environments and specific domains. The project manager must be able to delegate responsibility for some of these areas to different team members. At the same time he / she must be experienced enough to know who is qualified to do the respective work and also possesses the attitude needed to do it.

Achieving performance on projects requires excellent human relations skills. Thus, effective communication, influencing the organization to get things done, motivation, negotiation, conflict management, and problem solving could all be considered essential. The project manager needs to possess active listening skills and the ability to develop and adapt different approaches in order to solve problems. The project manager must lead their teams by providing *vision*, a specific leader behaviour, being able to delegate work, creating a positive working environment, and setting an example of appropriate and effective behavior. They must encourage the development of teamwork skills in order to use people effectively and keep them motivated. They must be psychologically strong which will help them maintain their self-confidence and positive attitude and reduce their stress levels even in tough circumstances. Finally, the project manager should be creative and flexible, but diligent and persistent.

In the past, there was this view that managers do not need to be popular, on the contrary, they must not be so likeable and liked by their teams in order to be effective. It is true that for certain autocratic or even dictatorial project managers this philosophy worked and even brought a certain amount of success. On the other hand, it is also true that such success is short-lived and rarely repeatable. While it can be said that project management is not a popularity contest, as a project manager, nobody would be extraordinary without the sincere respect and support of his / her team and other key individuals involved in the project.

A successful project manager is one who can repeat the success he / she enjoyed with a certain project with yet a new one, by repeatedly building effective teams – sometimes using different personnel or personnel regarded as average workers. The essential thing in doing that is developing a reputation based on respect – respect for him / her as specialist in the field,

having a lot of knowledge regarding the job to be done, and respect for the manner in which he/she carries out their role. It may not be fair to say that, but it is true: the manager also needs to possess at least a set of likeable traits of character and behaviour.

In this respect, the first thing and probably the easiest to do is to start the day / meeting / workshop with a smile. Quite often teams have low expectations from their manager in point of behaviour, especially towards them. That is why simple displays of good manners are a good first step. It is sometimes amazing how productive cheerful "good morning" and "good night" and "have a nice weekend" are. It is a very simple and surprisingly effective manner of work. However, this polite behaviour should be addressed to everyone, no matter if their positions in the organization are important or less important or if they are young or old, beautiful and smartly dressed or not, talkative or introverted, likeable or not so likeable themselves.

Of course, this is only the first thing to do and of course it will take more than a cheerful "hello" to get the team working at the highest parameters possible. First impressions are always essential. If a project manager gets off to a poor start with his / her team, it is very hard to recover their confidence and support. Thus, from the beginning, one should be aware that the most effective techniques to be used could be grouped in three categories:

1. Building a good team – by recruiting team members and starting to create the team spirit among them.
2. Motivating the team – by using specific strategies and techniques for improving the team's productivity.
3. Providing leadership – using visionary skills, setting direction, and building a loyal following.

Building a good team

More often than not, project managers have to start building their teams from scratch or, at best, they take over an already formed team which may have proven quite ineffective in implementing other projects. There are also some practical constraints that will be encountered when assembling a team among which budget constraints, preventing recruiting too many or too specialized people, or staff constraints, caused by the fact that the best performers are involved in other ongoing projects. All this always happens when being confronted with an acute sense of urgency to start the project. In this context it is essential not to allow yourself as a project manager to be rushed into making fast decisions. It is never a good idea to recruit indiscriminately or to think that anybody is better than nobody. Project managers must make sure they always have the right people available when they are

needed. The activity of putting together the right team should be driven by the resources and by the expected time framework for the phases of the project.

The time that is spent on introducing a new resource, in this case a new team member, is usually underestimated. The considerable waste of energies and consequent drain on current team members as they tell the new member what he / she needs to know about the project, the stage reached, and his / her responsibilities, are also often overlooked. The effect is that the recruitment of other members after the project is initiated will lead to a diminished team capability for several days and even weeks.

There are a few ideas that should be taken into consideration while dealing with the recruitment of the team. They pertain to common sense and could be put together under the following headings:

- Recruiting the key team members should be a priority;
- Assessing the personnel "on offer" should be made by the project manager himself / herself;
- Thinking about the mix of people who should be working well together.
- Looking for a positive attitude from the possible team members;
- Keeping in mind that it is crucial to involve the right people for the right jobs.

Motivating the team

From the point of view of managing the project team, a good project manager should have as one important objective increasing the team productivity. It goes without saying that everyone has a tendency of working slower than normal if they are demotivated. Motivating a team can require persistent and carefully-directed effort, while demotivation can be achieved in an instant.

Thus, by being inconsistent for no reason, by asking team members for their view on facts and then ignoring them, by not working side by side with the team members, by taking all the credit for successes and no blame for the failures, by making vain promises, the only result that will be obtained is demotivation. At the same time, if the project manager creates a gloomy outlook from the start, pessimism will be contagious for the whole staff, while if the project manager is optimistic and thinks that the work ahead is tough but doable, it will be easier for the staff to become well motivated.

A first step in achieving a high level of motivation for a team is avoiding anything that might demotivate its members. Then, the project manager should set clear objectives and specific tasks for each team member. The team member should also have a good understanding of what is going on in the project as a whole. The workload and the efforts needed across the team

should be properly balanced and consistent with its capacity. It is terribly demotivating to be asked to do more than you can (physically, mentally, and in accordance with the deadline) or to be working hard while others are hardly working. Furthermore, team members should be appropriately involved in the decision making process and their input should be taken into consideration in the analysis which precedes any such process.

Form the point of view of motivating individuals, several strategies could be considered. Among them, the sense of achievement and satisfaction gained as a result of seeing something completed, the inclination towards challenging jobs, the possibility of advancing in one's career, the intellectual reward of being able to fulfill a task which requires considerable thought or ingenuity, and last but not least, the financial reward. Mention should be made of small but enjoyable tokens of appreciation for the members of the team who have proven to be most committed and hardworking.

Providing leadership

Even if the team is formed and people are motivated, if the project manager does not have a clear picture about the end-product of the project and the ways to obtain it, it will be impossible for him / her to provide effective leadership. Thus, a solid plan and a comprehensive understanding of the whole matter are essential for providing leadership, but these are only two of the key aspects. The behaviour of a good project manager should be an inspiration for his / her people by working in such a way that creates confidence and prompts people to do their best to achieve the expected results.

Good project managers are able to adapt their leadership style to suit the project by taking into consideration the people and their organizational culture, the specificity of the project, and the list of project priorities. That is why, he / she must realize when it is time to change their style even after the beginning of the project. Most of the time, a consultative approach is more productive than an autocratic one, as people tend to work better when they feel involved. However, it is the duty and responsibility of the manager to listen to everybody but ultimately make his/her own decision.

There is also another aspect that should be taken into consideration: the manager's degree of involvement in the actual work. If the manager used to be a team member himself / herself, it will be quite difficult for him / her to conceive that someone could do things better and faster than he / she would have done and still would do. Hence the need to interfere and use his / her experience for solving matters which do not pertain to his / her area of responsibility. This behaviour could prove a disadvantage for the team as they may feel undermined through constant intervention and for the manager

himself / herself, as his / her attention would be diverted away from project management responsibilities. On the other hand, if the manager does not intervene at all, he / she could become out of touch with what is happening "in the real world" and also appear remote and maybe even aloof from the team members. Obviously, in this case too, the key word would be balance between direct involvement, confidence in the capacity of the team to follow directives, and even delegating competence.

Finally, in times of crisis – which inevitably appear in any project – a project manager's skills, especially people skills, are put to the test. For someone who is willing to motivate their team and to achieve long-term success, a crisis can be seen as an excellent opportunity to create confidence and goodwill among members of the staff. Before prompting people to admit responsibility for something that is going wrong, a good project manager should look for ways to fix the problem. It is essential to remain calm and to concentrate on working out a solution and such ponderate behaviour will certainly be appreciated and remembered by the team and will result in creating a positive and beneficial attitude.

Conclusion

No matter one's ability to produce sound project plans or to maintain control over risks and costs, for a good project manager, people skills are at least equally important. Many types of leadership styles may function well, but it is important for the manager to adopt the style that he / she is most comfortable with at a certain moment and not be reluctant to change it if circumstances are as such. The consultative approach is known to give good results, but this does not exclude showing that the project manager is ultimately responsible for everything that happens on the project, including taking the most important and / or delicate decisions.

In addition, if obvious motivating and demotivating factors are taken into consideration and the project manager always keeps in mind that the team is made up of individual characters, the team members that the manager will always consider for his / her projects will also be very keen to work with him / her, and consequently obtain the best results.

The conclusion is that being able to maintain effective leadership over people in the team is the key to keeping employees performing at their best. We considered it useful to include in this final part some tips¹ to help the manager produce and maintain effective leadership during the project and not only.

¹ Adapted from <http://www.projectmagazine.com/leadership-skills/355-12-tips-for-effective-leadership>, accessed on February, 27th 2012.

- Manage your work and your employees by objectives.
- Instruct your staff on exactly what they should do and provide them with necessary supervision only when it is absolutely necessary.
- Have an open door policy and make time to listen to your people when they need or to talk to you.
- Remember that people are the most valuable asset, so constantly make your employees feel important and valuable to the project.
- Try to create such an environment in which people feel confident about their duties.
- Keep your word no matter what you say, so that people should know what to expect from you.
- Do yourself what you want your team to do, starting from respecting the work hours and ending with delivering what should be delivered before deadlines.
- Pay attention to the way you are dressed and to your posture, for it is well known that both employees and possible customers judge you by the way you act and look in the first minutes after you have met.

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