

Conversations around Project Leadership

Abstract

The most effective project managers have a wide repertoire of leadership and management skills that they can call on and utilise effectively to achieve project success.

In this session, Sharyn White will draw on "observations from the field" to begin a conversation around project leadership, highlighting the need for project managers to demonstrate flexibility in their leadership style.

The Project Manager role inevitably requires us to understand how to respond to a variety of complex situations in a flexible way. At times we may need to call on our "management" skill set. At other times, a "leadership" skill set will be more appropriate.

In the lead up to the 2009 AIPM conference we are encouraged to "tell it as it is". Typically it's not management skills or capability that brings a project undone – it's the absence of leadership!

Keywords

Project leadership, flexibility of approach, management versus leadership, change

As a project practitioner and consultant, I have had the opportunity to work with numerous organisations in both the public and private sectors. In this privileged position, I have been able to share many conversations with people around projects. The purpose of this paper is to share some observations around leadership in project management.

Upon undertaking some research in this area, I found it interesting to discover that there is no shared definition of leadership, and a debate between leadership and management has been raging for a number of years. There is an abundance of literature that tries to address the difference between leadership and management, with many contributors concerned at the difference between the two.

I would like to include two quotations, that are particularly relevant.

The first is by Warren Bennis [1], who states

"There is a profound difference between management and leadership, and both are important. To manage means to bring about, to accomplish, to have charge of or responsibility for, to conduct. Leading is influencing, guiding in a direction, course, action, opinion. The distinction is crucial."

Another influential thinker on the distinction between management and leadership is John Kotter [2], who makes the following observations:

“Leadership and management are two distinctive and complementary systems of action...Both are necessary for success in an increasingly complex and volatile business environment...Management is about coping with complexity...Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change.”

This last point is extremely relevant to this discussion. It is generally accepted that projects are about change. Sometimes we can touch the results of these changes e.g. a new health facility or airline schedule; or it can be a result that is less tangible, such as a new policy or procurement process. Regardless of the type of project or resulting change, it is reasonable to propose that leading projects is about leading change.

Because of the complexity and uncertainty around projects and the changes they are effecting, a project manager inevitably has to respond to a variety of complex situations in a flexible way. At times we may need to call on our “management” skill set e.g. planning, contracting or controlling. . At other times, a “leadership” skill set may be more appropriate in order to communicate, influence and inspire confidence.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to work with a project manager who demonstrated excellent project management skills. She had established thorough and well-informed plans for the project at hand, and had incorporated a high degree of innovation and use of technology as a lever for change. The project manager had estimated the labour and cost outlays for the project and had managed and revised these forecasts appropriately. She had extensive issues and risk registers in place that were regularly updated and she monitored and reported on the project regularly. In short, this project manager had all of the elements of the Project Management Body of Knowledge [4] covered YET the project was in a precarious position.

The project manager was aware that the project was not progressing as expected and had proactively sought external advice. On closer inspection the project manager was managing the project very effectively, but there was little evidence of demonstrated leadership or people skills. She was pushing the project forward but wasn’t bringing the people and the organisation with her. She wasn’t influencing, building rapport or establishing trust. Being new to the organisation, she didn’t have established relationships or credibility with key stakeholders. Inadequate leadership was presenting as a serious threat to the project, and a barrier to sustainable change for the business.

The project manager, despite having all the technical skills necessary for the job (which was clearly why she had been selected for the position) did not demonstrate the leadership skills necessary for the project to be successful. And perhaps those in charge of the project had overlooked the importance of bringing these skills into the project.

Bass [5] says “sometimes leaders manage and sometimes managers lead” and I think this is essential in a project context. Gardner [6] observed that all of the first class managers he has encountered, turn out to demonstrate a lot of leadership behaviours.

I have seen this demonstrated on numerous occasions and two senior managers come to mind. Both occupy senior executive positions and are practicing project managers.

The first has occupied several leadership roles – not relating to projects – and is currently leading his first project as a project manager. On commencing with the project he immediately recognised the gap in his skill set relating to the “technical” process of managing a project, and established a strategy to address this. He embarked on a professional development program in order to develop his project management skills, such as planning and scoping a project, risk analysis and mitigation and scheduling. Because of his experience, his leadership or people skills came naturally as he worked to establish relationships with key stakeholders, employed effective (two-way!) communication channels and recognised who and when to influence. This project manager consciously surrounded himself with capable people who he could trust and work effectively with. Here is a project poised for success.

The second project manager started as a “technical” project manager. She has worked on a number of projects for many years and, at an early stage in her career, recognised the need to develop leadership skills. With the support of her manager she entered a leadership program (not typically offered to project managers) and hasn’t looked back.

These real life examples, supported by research, demonstrate a key point. The most effective project managers have a wide repertoire of leader and manager behaviours that they can call on and utilise effectively in order to achieve project success.

From a project management perspective, we need to consider the difference between management and leadership, understand the importance of each and demonstrate flexibility in our manager-leader approach.

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