

Forget Project Management...It's Project Leadership that Counts!

By Steve Kirk

"I've worked with my stakeholders to identify their requirements. I've talked to my experts to work out the scope of my project and estimate each task. I've painstakingly put together the schedule and budget and documented it all in a project specification. I've even agreed on a risk and governance plan with my sponsor. I've had the project kickoff and distributed the work packages.

So how come nothing is happening? I'm already late for the first milestone and every time I chase up my project team, it seems they are too busy on other work to help me. Why isn't this going better?"

Does this scenario sound familiar? Have you rigorously followed "best practice," only to run into a thick blanket of apathy and indifference? It just doesn't seem fair, does it?

The solution is to start behaving as a leader, not just as a manager.

You see, although it's convenient to label us as "Project Managers," behind that title is a number of skills and competencies. And, leadership is one of the most important but probably the hardest to learn competencies. Just being competent at management won't usually be enough to deliver that elusive, successful project.

Now, before you ask your project management training provider for your money back, let me just stress that leadership without the management skills to back it up is equally likely to fail. You still need to understand how to identify requirements, plan and monitor work, manage change control and close a project. What I'm advocating is the need for the leadership skills to inform and support these project management techniques.

I like to think of leadership as the answer to the question "Why am I doing this?" while management is the answer to the question "What should I be doing and how should I be doing it?"

Leadership is about creating a long-term vision of what your organization wants to achieve and then getting the commitment of your staff to be part of this vision. It's about handling the interpersonal issues between staff, teams and other organizations, to keep everyone focused on what's important. It's about motivating and inspiring your staff to get past the problems that could derail your mission and it's about helping them through the changes, both big and small, that will get you to where you want to be. Basically, it's about people.

Management is about setting short-term, measurable objectives. It's about defining the work to be done and detailed planning of the resources needed. It's about working out a budget and managing any risks and changes you encounter. It's about monitoring what has been done and controlling what you do next. Basically, it's about processes.

Unfortunately, you can't learn leadership in the same way you learn management. There are very few rules to apply, just guidelines on what should work. And there are different styles of leadership that a good leader will deploy in different situations, with different people. So be prepared to learn and practice different techniques that you can apply when appropriate. Here are a few key areas to consider and use as a checklist for your own leadership capabilities.

When Is a Team Not a Team?

Every major project has a team. Typically, this will be a cross-functional mix of experts from each department or division in your organization, plus external consultants, subcontractors and agencies. Usually, your team members haven't worked together, and each has their own personality and corporate culture.

So how do we handle this? We might have a project kickoff meeting when the project is described and work is assigned before everyone gets on the road back to their offices. That might be sufficient if your objective is just to get people started on their tasks. But if you want to build a team rather than a group of resources, you need to do more.

One definition of a team is that they have a common goal, they work within agreed ground rules, and they acknowledge that they are a team rather than a group of individuals. If you are lucky enough to have worked in such a team you will have witnessed that rare commodity, team spirit, and the power of the team in overcoming problems and getting things done. But if you rely on luck to achieve this, you will probably be disappointed. Each team goes through a number of team-building phases — the famous Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing phases defined by Bruce Tuckman in the 1960s. And, as a leader, you need to modify your behavior to get your team to the Performing phase (and keep them there) as quickly as possible.



This means discussing and agreeing with your team their roles and responsibilities and ground rules, and encouraging that they get to know each other (Forming). Then comes dealing with the inevitable conflicts and misunderstandings in the initial stages (Storming), encouraging and supporting as real work starts to get done (Norming) and, finally, delegating and challenging when your team reaches their peak (Performing). Most importantly, you need to take time and effort to work through these stages and reach the optimum stage. If not, your team may become mired in the dysfunctional Storming phase.

Conflict: Is It All Bad?

However well you build your team and engage with your staff, there is always going to be conflict, whether between you and your staff or between your staff directly. It might sound odd, but a low level of conflict should be encouraged. We are talking about debate and different opinions here, not outright war! If conflict is stifled entirely, your team becomes apathetic or frustrated and there is a danger of "group-think" setting in. On the other hand, if you allow conflict to escalate unchecked, you will end up with warring factions that lose sight of what you are trying to achieve, in their desire to destroy each other. Either of these last two scenarios are clearly dysfunctional teams, hence the need for a healthy level of criticism and analysis.

How you handle conflict depends on your concern for the other person as well as concern for yourself. For example, if you want to assert your own position and ignore the other person, you may take a Forcing style. But if you put the other person first and ignore your own needs and wants, you would take an Accommodating style. Or you could delay or ignore the conflict entirely and adopt an Avoiding style.

Which is right? As always with questions of leadership, it depends. If you value the relationship more than the outcome of the conflict, then an Accommodating style may be appropriate. But if your project depends on winning the argument, you may adopt a Forcing style. And if you need a delay to get more information about the conflict, then Avoiding it initially may be a good tactic.

Often the best way to resolve conflict is to try and find a solution that is best for both you and the other person. This Collaborating approach is intended to find that elusive win-win outcome and is the basis for modern negotiating techniques. Rather than presenting your position on the topic being negotiated, then having the other person do the same and finally, compromising somewhere in the middle, this approach is about exploring the interests of the people negotiating. It's about looking at different options that will meet both your and their interests, and where you really do have to compromise (price is always a typical example), it's about agreeing on a fair, independent measure. Like the other leadership skills I've talked about here, negotiation is something that can be learned and should definitely be practiced, as it's great for patching up relationships and resolving conflict generally.

Change Is Inevitable and Resistance Is Natural

So far, I've looked at the leadership skills you would commonly employ with your project team. But to finish with, I want to talk about a technique you could use with your project customers and users.

How often have you been involved in projects where the project team proudly delivered the outputs to the users (a new IT system, a new business process) only for it to be ignored, ridiculed and generally abused? "Why are they so negative?" we ask. "We are only trying to help them." The reason is simple psychology.

In any business change, the initial reaction is one of rejection. Even if your project is delivering a better system or process, the natural

reaction of your users is to stick with what they know and ignore your project as long as possible. Inertia is a powerful force and you need to engage and communicate early on to help get past this stage.

As you apply more pressure, expect a digging in of heels as people cling to the old ways. Any perceived weakness in what you are delivering will be exploited and no doubt, you will hear that wonderful phrase, "We've tried that before and it doesn't work." The worst thing you can do is ignore this. However frustrating, you have to tackle this head on and persuade your users that this is in their interests. Of course, if you are expecting compromises to be made, then you have to be brutally honest about this, or it will come back to bite you later.

At last, attitudes will change and there will be acknowledgement that your change is needed (or at least accepted). Finally, there is light at the end of the tunnel! Now is the time to draw a line under the old way of doing things and start implementing your change.

During the acceptance stage, the detail of what this change means to each individual is worked out and you need to support them in adjusting and coming to terms with what is going on. Finally, during the support stage, you need to reinforce the change by rewarding success and ensuring your users don't slip back into their old ways. In other words, don't take your foot off the gas just yet.

Who Else Can Help with This Leadership Stuff?

Feeling overwhelmed? There's a lot to take on and build into your job description as Project Manager. So think about how you could delegate some of these responsibilities to others in your project organization.

This is where good project sponsors can really make a contribution. If they are the true driving force behind your project, they should be able to spell out the vision and help get the commitment of your staff. They should motivate and inspire them during the project, to overcome the inevitable setbacks. They should be able to support you in resolving conflict and sorting out interpersonal issues with your team. As a minimum, they should acknowledge the importance of incorporating leadership activities such as team building, change management and communication into your project plan and budget.

I'm also a strong advocate of having a good business analyst on your project. Business analysts can act as an "agent of change" and work with your users and customers to progress through the stages of the change process. They can also contribute to the planning of this part of the project, as hopefully they will have experience with other projects and advise on what works and what doesn't, in helping users overcome their resistance to change and embrace it willingly.

The Missing Ingredient in Your Project

If your projects aren't progressing as well as you'd like, and you are already following your corporate project management methodology, is your leadership up to scratch? Are you really taking into account the issues I've mentioned above? If not, I suggest you take a good, hard look at some of these tools and techniques because I think I know what you are missing: people power!

Steve Kirk is an IT project management practitioner, trainer and consultant. He has 15 years experience in the IT sector as a project manager, consultant and director. Through his company, SGK Consulting, Mr. Kirk helps clients make business change happen so they are more capable, consistent and profitable. He can be reached at steve@sgkconsulting.co.uk.



Find out how ESI International can help your organisation.

To learn more, please contact ESI at enquiries@esi-intl.com or +44(0)20 7017 7100.