

Capitalizing on the Difference Between Project Management and Project Leadership

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Are you working with project managers or project leaders?
How can you tell? Is it a project manager, focused on delivering within scope, schedule, and budget? Is it a project leader, a visionary that delivers value for customers in the marketplace?

WHAT DOES IT TYPICALLY LOOK LIKE? WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

There is no denying there are different characteristics of a project manager and a project leader. Oftentimes it is stated that managers “do things right” and leaders “do the right thing.” Doing things right often finds the project manager focusing on compliance to project management methodology defined to initiate, execute, and deliver. Doing the right thing finds the project leader knowing the relevant business case to drive the project, and why the investment is being made to deliver a project, as well as building a team that is the “right team” to get things done. Why are they set apart? In theory, most people tend to think of the differences through the traditional perspectives of the manager vs. leader attributes that are captured in a multitude of articles, books, and writings as principles of management and leadership. We believe, in addition to the traditional textbook thinking, there is a set of characteristics that sets a project manager and a project leader apart, including **Stewardship, Alignment, Mindset, and Adaptability.**



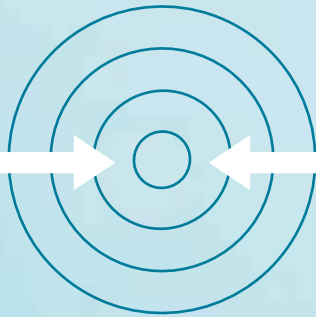


Figure 1

Project Management Focuses On:

- Measurable objectives and outcomes
- Directing what gets done
- Narrow perspectives
- Team structure
- Assigning tasks
- Minimal flexibility

Project Leadership Focuses On:

- Setting the vision aligned with measurable outcomes
- Influencing the right strategies to get things done
- Broad perspectives
- Team synergies
- Motivating people
- Maximum adaptability



LEADERSHIP APPLIED TO THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT COMPETENCY

Applying these characteristics to the role of being a project manager or project leader are not easily identified. To date we haven't witnessed an invention that can measure an individual's percentage of integrity, influence, ability to inspire, or ability to engage. We believe there is a distinction between project management and project leadership based on its primary focus. A few examples to highlight the variations between project leadership skills and management skills can be seen in Figure 1.

Project leadership can be described simplistically as an ability to get things done well by utilizing available resources. Can you think of any examples when you may have encountered a marked difference between a project manager and project leader assigned to an initiative? What were the characteristics that distinguished between a project manager and a project leader? Consider these following characteristics ...

1. STEWARDSHIP

In a business context, a steward is one entrusted with the management of the company's affairs. Stewardship, in the context of a project, involves placing the goals of the project, the project team, and the overall organization above one's own self-interest. Stewardship is demonstrated in the way a project leader earns trust with their team, employs motivation, and displays honest and ethical behavior that is consistent with the values of the organization.

Project leaders are entrusted with an organization's most important and strategic endeavors. They don't wait for someone to tell them what to do to solve problems. A project leader takes action and the initiative or responsibility to propel the project forward with the correct trajectory. Clear communication of

goals, expectations, performance, and feedback support a project leader in setting the tone for the project team. These actions convey their accountability to shareholders and their responsibility to impart vision and deliver financial results. Their authority is used to advance the interests and welfare of the team and the overall organization.

2. ALIGNMENT

From the onset of a project and throughout project initiation, a true project leader has a vision of how to achieve the desired results. Alignment is key in planning every project and constructing a successful project team. A leader understands that a project is a temporary endeavor and will be constructed of unique resources with individual strengths and interests. Many times the team development process is not addressed in the project environment and may not take into account those who do not have a direct reporting relationship. A leader understands that their responsibility to define and build a team doesn't start and end at the onset of a project. The continual development and alignment of team members needs are maintained throughout the project lifecycle. This involves having an understanding of the different team members' styles and assets and the ability to capitalize on each at the proper time. Equally important is ensuring that each team member realizes their significance and value as it aligns to the successful delivery of the project and as part of the team.

Visionary leaders understand the importance of enabling team members to feel they have a real stake in the project and help them align with the defined goals. The ability to build consensus within a project team or with executive sponsors, to utilize influence, negotiate or motivate to gain buy-in and support is crucial to the effective delivery of a project goal.



While keeping the team aligned and on task is essential, a project leader must maintain alignment with the company's strategic goals. What is the strategy of their organization and how does it align to the overall company strategy? An effective project leader understands the vision of the project and alignment throughout the organization. More important than understanding is the ability to articulate the vision, as a project cannot be successful without consensus. Successful project leadership enables a team to feel they have a vested interest in the project and to further understand why they are doing it. This empowers people to experience and see their future as part of the vision for the organization. Throughout the project, one will know if they have achieved successful alignment as all team members can reiterate the goals and strategic importance of their work.

3. MINDSET

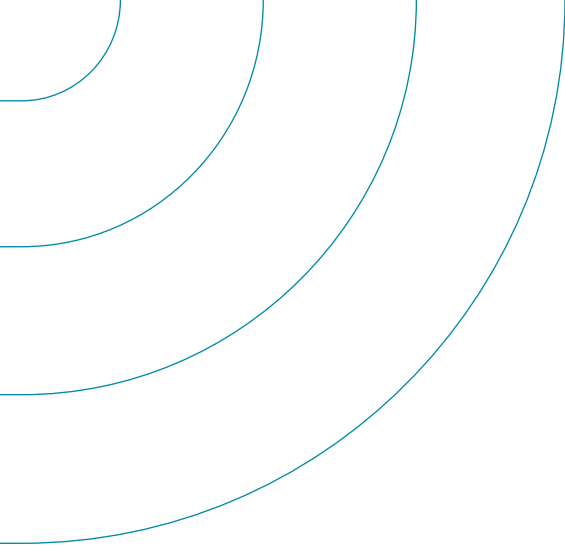
No one wants to work with, or for, a negative person. Project leaders are recognized by their mindset, their ability to handle the highs and lows experienced during a project lifecycle, and influencing a successful outcome. Project leaders are focused on the action and value driven by execution. Passion for their work and belief in the mission of their project set expectations of the same for those around them. A can-do attitude lets them address issues in stride while their energy, curiosity, and creativity enable them to see barriers as opportunities. Confidence and enthusiasm are contagious!

While keeping project goals in sight and maintaining drive to achieve results, a project leader with a positive mindset has the ability to attract and drive a willing team. An enthusiastic project leader engages their team. Living at the intersection between optimism and realism, a project leader is able to put success and failure in proper perspective.

4. ADAPTABILITY

"It's not what you say, it's how you say it." What does that have to do with project leadership? A key aspect of leading a successful project is the ability to adapt to one's audience and environment, whether in actions, communications, or culture. 'Adapting' commonly means to make something appropriate for a new purpose or situation and involves innovation, experimentation, and classic trial and error. Many strategic projects include adaptation to a new environment inclusive of new technologies, people, and processes. In these situations, a project leader is essential. A project leader is skilled in influencing behaviors and adapting their own behavior as needed. With a focused communication style and approach, a project leader is able to adjust for the audience, whether that is a stakeholder, a member of the senior leadership team, or a business analyst on the project team.

A project leader motivates the team and instills a sense of purpose in completing the project while many project managers do not get the buy-in required to sustain the change long term.



Adaptability is closely related to flexibility and resilience, or the ability to absorb change and disruption. Understanding the dynamic nature of most projects, leaders address changes by evaluating a range of options and dealing with the unexpected. Adaptability summarizes the skills to solve problems and address issues by focusing on recognition of complexity and ambiguity, learning, and adjusting in a given situation.

Traditional project management methodology stresses the importance of planning for the unknown, using risk mitigation, and other planning techniques. This has limitations, as projects are frequently met with unknown uncertainties. Given the dynamic nature of today’s business and technology projects, a project leader strives to integrate adaptability within their team and create an adaptive environment — one which empowers a project team to effectively navigate the unknown.

One trait of a mature and adaptive team is continuous learning and evaluation throughout the project lifecycle. This includes listening to customers and internal stakeholders, as well as recognizing any changes within the market, and learning from past failures. Equally important is learning to make course corrections. This may translate into revisions to the project plan, team structure, or other areas of operations to ensure the project is on track to delivering on its objectives. The goal of any project leader is always to stay ahead of the curve and adapt where necessary before there is a negative impact on the project.

CLOSING

Project leadership and project management are closely aligned, yet they serve different needs in a project environment. Good project managers do things right, while good project leaders do the right things. That being said, there is a place for skills

associated with project management and project leadership throughout the lifecycle of an initiative.

Project leaders must set the vision and remove obstacles to provide a clear path to success by using the strengths of the team to successfully deliver, yet balancing the needs of executive sponsors and stakeholders. Project managers must ensure there is a plan and focus on priorities that need to get done, as well as aligning the proper governance and oversight necessary to deliver successful initiatives.

There is an integration of both essential project management and strong project leadership skills that are critical to handle strategic initiatives in today’s marketplace. The balance isn’t easy, but finding the right recipe, inclusive of both art and science, will help to ensure successful delivery of your projects.

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