

## **Positive Leadership in Project Management: The Importance of Connective Leadership**

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Leadership is something that can't be defined easily. The definition varies greatly depending on who you are, where you live, your family background, your education, where you work, your personal values and many more areas of influence. The type of leadership style you may demonstrate to others will also vary depending on the situation you find yourself in at any particular time. Consider the headlines and top news stories we are exposed to regularly. It seems that just about every day of the week you can pick up a newspaper and read about another CEO or corporate officer that has been sentenced to time in prison for "cooking the books" or some other completely inappropriate or downright illegal action that caused tremendous loss for a company, disappointment for shareholders, and a trip to the unemployment line for hundreds, even thousands of employees. These so called "leaders" completely missed the boat on what leadership is. Instead of working WITH the organization and its employees, they focused their energy on their own interests and their wallets and pocket books. They were not leading a company to greater levels of success, but they were successful in the areas of secrecy, deceit and dishonesty. Try finding any book, publication, or periodical that includes those words in the definition or description of leadership. If you do, the names associated with those words will probably be connected with disastrous situations, ruined lives, and terrible periods in history. *Positive Leadership* focuses on the needs of the organization and the people who carry out the tasks to achieve the objectives of the organization. It doesn't mean being soft and avoiding tough decisions. It means commitment to the organization and its employees. It means placing the organization above personal interests and making the right decisions for organizational benefit. Sometimes these decisions will not be popular, but with the proper amount of useful, informative communication, sincere effort to identify alternatives, and, if possible, programs that will mitigate any hardships or significant changes to employees, *Positive Leadership* will be recognized and respected.

There is no question that organizations, regardless of size or discipline, need strong leaders. These are people with vision, commitment and the ability to influence their constituents. This applies to Project Management as well. It is essential for project managers to accept the fact that they have been assigned to a leadership position and must display the characteristics of *Positive Leadership*.

### **Building Positive Leadership**

Most people, at some time in their lives, have heard the phrase "Dance Like No One is Watching." It means that we shouldn't be concerned about how people are judging our behavior or how we act. We should do what feels right and what makes us comfortable. Too many people stay off the dance floor in fear of what others may think. We sacrifice fun and feeling free because of the fear of looking silly. Expressing one's self without fearing what someone else may think is, in my opinion, an essential leadership quality. Leaders need to share ideas, think differently, and cause other people to look their way while not being concerned about judgmental issues and whether or not they are dancing in step. Sometimes ideas may sound too radical but, if you think about it, many radical ideas have changed history and paved the way for progress.

While we need to spend less time worrying about how people react to our free-spirited behavior and occasional step outside of the familiar "box", when it comes to leadership, making decisions, planning strategies, and working with people to build or improve our businesses, we need to "*Lead like everyone is watching.*" Leaders are in the spotlight all of the time and they must accept that. Even low-key leaders or those who do not prefer the spotlight are observed and followed. An example would be General Omar Bradley. He was known as the soldier's general. He was a great leader in a difficult time and made tough decisions, but he was very much respected by the men and women in the ranks. He empathized with the soldiers and always kept the mission in mind. General Patton and General MacArthur were also great leaders but their style and desires drove them into the spotlight. They *needed* to be in it. It was a mix of leadership with a heavy dose of politics, and personal ego. I can't say they were wrong and they did achieve great successes, but maybe there are better ways. How many leaders follow this same approach today?

Today's leaders, specifically project leaders, need to be aware that people are watching and observing, but they need to be less concerned about ego. They need to consider their actions and their decisions and be willing to make the

tough calls and then stand behind them. But more importantly, the tough calls should be based on the needs of the business, the stakeholders, and the organization, not on the impact to one's own stock portfolio or personal advancement. The "leaders" we read about today, by their actions, have caused us to redefine what leadership really is and what we expect from leaders. Let's start with building trust, and creating visions that the entire organization can support and commit to.

There is a saying about health and diet: If you take care of the inside, the inside will take care of the outside. To the leaders of today and tomorrow: Take care of your teams, take care of the people who do the work, communicate regularly, don't distance yourself from the very people you need in order to be successful. Show respect, show firmness, and be fair. Demonstrate integrity, listen more and build trust. And so, as I stated previously, take care of the inside (your team) and your outside, that which is seen by most, (your leadership and ability to work with others) will shine brightly and inspire not only your team members but the many who are watching as you lead.

## **Redefining Project Leadership**

Earlier in this paper, the definition of leadership was discussed. The term can be applied to those who have achieved great things for the human race, for their countries, companies, or the people they represent. Leadership can also be applied to people who have made a less than positive impact on humanity. Without specifically listing these individuals, there have been periods in history, including events of today where "leaders" influenced huge numbers of people, even entire civilizations to follow them and fulfill their goals. The point is, strong leaders have great power and that power can be used to achieve what they (the leaders) perceive to be great things.

Many people believe that the definition of Leader means someone who climbs to the top making tough decisions and living with the results while carrying the burden of accountability. Others define leaders as people who can inspire their teams and coworkers to achieve more than they thought was possible through motivation and trust without actually issuing orders. No matter how you define it, leadership makes things happen. It makes people act. It produces results. There is, however, a positive and negative side of leadership and we should be aware of the effects of both sides.

**The dark side (remember the Force?):** These leaders get things done by forcing their employees or team members to follow strict guidelines, company policies, and organizational protocol. They inhibit creativity by minimizing shared decisions and participatory discussions. They make statements like "I'm absolutely, positively convinced that this is the way we should do it! Now what do you think?" Statements like that generally encourage very few responses or simply "OK boss, you are right." Leaders who fall in the category of negative leadership generally have very little trust in their teams and micro manage to an extreme degree. (Remember Theory X?). In his book *Project Management: A systems Approach to Project Planning, Scheduling and Controlling*, Dr. Harold Kerzner (2003, p15) mentions another type of manager, the "Executive Meddler." These are managers who must get involved in the details or provide "help that isn't wanted or needed. There may be some legitimate reasons for executive meddling, but, in general, this is something we would not want to experience on a regular basis. It is important to note that there will be times, regardless of leadership style, when there will be a need to make decisions without discussion or to overrule a team decision. These situations are governed by the nature of the issue at hand, usually a period of crisis or some critical event, don't allow for much decision making time. The leaders in this category do get things done and in times of crisis they excel at achieving the expected results. They can make quick decisions and can live with their actions. They are precise in stating what they want and can assess loads of information quickly. The World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001 is an example of this type of leadership. Mayor Giuliani, known for his strong leadership skills and tight management style, acted quickly and decisively to bring New York City back together after a devastating event. He became a national hero but he was also transformed by the experience. He emerged as a role model and positive leader. (Read "Leadership"- Rudolph W. Giuliani).

**The positive side:** Leaders in this category rely on a more participative style. Consensus driven decisions and trust in team members are extremely important. Leaders on the positive side create partnerships with their team members, employees and associates. An atmosphere of free and open thinking and sharing of creative ideas drives decisions and interaction. Disagreement is expected and even encouraged. Conflict often brings out the truly important issues and paves the way for the most effective solutions and agreements. There are risks associated with this style and leadership approach. Sometimes the distinction between the manager/leader and the team members becomes fuzzy. Responsibility and accountability for decisions must be clearly defined and understood by everyone on the team as

early in the planning process as possible. Roles must also be fully explained and agreed upon to prevent teams from infighting and stalling progress. Consensus leadership sometimes delays the decision process and the leader must know when to intervene and how to intervene in such a way that the team is not discouraged or feel that their empowerment has been reduced.

Considering the complexities of leadership, both sides have advantages and disadvantages and I believe that many great leaders move from side to side or shift from one style to another to some degree depending on the situation, never forgetting the objectives or the impact a decision will have on the organization, the project or the team members. The important thing to remember is that leaders recognize the need to remain flexible and switch between styles while working to find the best combination.

Considering what has been discussed to this point it is safe to say that leadership means different things to different people. There are qualities and characteristics that are common among leaders, but each leader we identify, including ourselves, has unique qualities of their own. Take time to assess your leadership style. How would you classify yourself as a leader? Besides the typical leader qualities we are all familiar with, assess your inner leadership qualities. In his book *Leadership From The Inside Out* Kevin Cashman (1998, p31) asks the reader to consider the questions: Who are you? Where are you going? Why are you going there? What are my self-limiting patterns? In my notes and insights associated with the book I added the following: Approach your project as a creative work. The thought came from a quote in the book by Peter Senge (Cashman, p34) that stated "Personal Mastery means approaching one's life as a creative work". Regarding our projects, as leaders we need to consider our projects as creative works, with talented people who desire leadership that will take them to higher levels of achievement through encouragement, effective communication, trust and dignity.

Leaders, in many cases, are considered role models. If you are a role model, what behaviors would you like your team members and associates to observe in you and maybe even emulate? In the book "Leadership" by Rudolph Giuliani he states in chapter 6 (2002, p36) "Making the right decision is the most important part of leadership!" How do you ensure that you are making the right decisions? Decision-making can be difficult but as the saying goes "somebody's got to do it." Part of the process is the willingness to make a decision. Leaders act and make decisions even when all of the information isn't available. They don't always make the right ones. That's where lessons learned and experience come from. Knowing if you made the right decision usually comes after the decision is made and the results come back. To help you in your attempt to make the "right" decision a quick tip that I find most effective is to ask yourself, or your team, a simple question; "Are you fully aware of the implications of that decision?" This question may drive some additional thought and produce some new alternatives. Try it at your next project meeting.

One additional thought regarding positive leadership and the "dark side"; we look at ourselves the way we think other people see us. We often fail to see how we truly impact the people or the team around us and we really can't see ourselves through their eyes. What we can do is ask for feedback, (I was told recently that all feedback is good!). We need it so we can understand where we should make adjustments and to calibrate ourselves to the project team's needs. We can also take some time to identify the qualities of those who we believe are our exact opposites or more specifically, those people who annoy us most. These are the people we would rather not encounter but frequently do. If we begin to understand their qualities and characteristics we can determine what actions, behavior, and adjustments to our own styles may be necessary to achieve the results we are seeking. To summarize these issues and thoughts, there is a positive and negative or dark side of leadership and it involves more than personal styles. Leaders may switch from side to side on occasion depending on the situation but it is important to understand the consequences of our actions and our behaviors. One more thing to consider: think about these statements each day. "Because of what I have done today, my organization will achieve its objectives." Because of what we have accomplished today my team will succeed in delivering our project objectives. Take the time to list your achievements each day. Did you accomplish all that you intended? If not, what was not achieved? Why not? Was it important? What can you do about it?

## **Connective Leadership**

The Project Management Institute's *Guide to the Project management Body Of Knowledge* (PMBOK®) defines leadership as follows: (PMI, 2000, p24)

- Establishing Direction-Developing a vision of the future and the strategies to achieve that vision
- Aligning People- Communicating by words and deeds
- Motivating and inspiring- Energizing and helping people to overcome barriers to change

Leadership includes more than the above bullet items but in general they do support a generally accepted perception. In addition there are some other aspects about leadership to consider:

- People respond to leadership and those who set a clear course of action and direction
- The power of leadership cannot be underestimated
- Leadership includes the ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do. (PMI, 2000, p24)

Leadership is also demonstrated through words well as actions. Leaders must be able to “speak leadership” using words that inspire, build trust, and truly indicate commitment. In the book *The Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes & Posner, 1998) in research done by professor Roderick Hart, University of Texas, four characteristics of words commonly used by leaders are provided

- “Realistic” words portray tangible and concrete objects, such as *automobile* and *highway*. (use your project deliverables to get your message across)
- “Optimistic” Words express hope and possibilities. As a project manager you must continuously display a positive attitude and a source or strength.
- “Activity” words show motion. Focus on getting things done through activities and describe your expectations about the actions of your team

What Leaders Know Intuitively. The following list, from Kouzes and Posner- *The Leadership Challenge*, (1998, pp135-136) provides us with some additional “leadership nuggets that experienced leaders have learned:

- “Certainty” words express assuredness. As project managers we must be aware of the need to remain confident in ourselves and our teams
- Make the intangible image of the future tangible and concrete. We need to communicate effectively and use our skills to help our teams paint a mental picture of how the project will turnout. Removing fuzzy perceptions and crystallizing the goals and objectives.
- Offer positive and optimistic predictions that the dream will be realized. Focus the success factors but be prepared for the challenges.
- Be resolute and confident that the goal will be reached. Effective leaders demonstrate confidence in achieving objectives but also know when goals cannot be achieved. Remain realistic and ensure that goals remain grounded.
- Propel the mission forward, infusing it with motion and energy. Project leaders are the energizers and provide a source of strength to the project team. True leaders also realize that an occasional recharge will be required. Use the team, take advantage of their talents, encourage energy transfers between team members.

It is clear that leadership encompasses much more than we may have imagined and it appears in comes in numerous forms and styles. There is no “one size fits all” but we do need it if we want to get things done or to make a difference.

Bringing it all together I use the term “Connective Leadership.” The ability to take the integrity, energy and commitment of the leader, instill trust within the team and tap into the strengths of the team to create a willingness to achieve the objectives of the project. Connective Leadership is just what is suggests:

- Connecting your inner values and personal commitment to the team’s strengths, talents, and abilities.
- Encouraging innovation by creating a bond between the leader and team to achieve extraordinary results
- Establishing mutual trust and respect.
- Communicating a vision that is accepted and internalized by the project team.

### Connecting the Energy

- Kinetic- from the Greek word *kinetikos*: of or relating to the motion of material bodies and the forces and energy associated therewith.
- Energy- from the Greek word *energeia*: The capacity of acting or being active, natural power vigorously exerted
- *Kinetic Energy*- Energy associated with motion

Today's project managers must be effective, connective leaders who fully understand the power of leadership. Just like quality, leadership is a journey, not a destination. Like risk management, its justifiable regardless of type of project, like the nine knowledge areas of the PMBOK Guide ®, it is part of the system of project management, and like requirements for your project, its difficult to define. The best advice I can give about leadership is to continue learning about it. Look for opportunities to improve it, obtain feedback often and embrace it. Learn from your experiences and utilize the strengths of your team.

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