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OPINION

Project Success vs. Fear of Leading




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It takes more than management skills to lead an IT project to a successful conclusion. In fact, it takes courage -- plus the ability to influence others and a temperament that doesn't permit the option of giving up when the going gets tough. Project management without project leadership is likely

to result in project failure.

Mission-critical IT investments are inherently risky, even with a certified project management professional (PMP) in place to guide the project.

Factors like unrealistic timelines and poor planning can certainly jeopardize project success  -- but could these factors be symptoms of a larger issue? Perhaps the root cause for project failure lies in an inability to *lead* projects, not just manage them.

Where's the Leader?

Using certified PMPs has become a standard best practice among organizations, which one would think would lead to higher IT project success rates. A whopping 67 percent of the companies who participated in a recent [KPMG](#) survey said their program/project management function was in need of improvement. Why? A number of leading factors were given, including unreasonable project timelines, poorly defined requirements, poor scope management and unclear project objectives.

PMP certification is important; however, it alone is not sufficient for successful project management. For many troubled IT projects that seemed doomed for failure, there appears to be a common link: There is no leadership. A project manager may be focused on what needs to be done and may well know how to do it -- but may not be acting as a project *leader*.

At a basic level, project managers must be able to set the vision, define success, and determine the measurements of success. Even with a certification in hand, though, it takes true leadership

to drive complex projects to successful conclusions.

Project *management* without project *leadership* is likely to result in project failure. What makes someone a true leader? Volumes of business and strategy texts have been written about this critical competency. Some authors or practitioners have made the point that leadership and management represent two different skill sets, and that an individual either has the characteristics and skills necessary for leadership *or* those more appropriate for management.

Others have suggested that leadership comes from knowing where to go and that management is about how to actually get there.

Certainly, project managers *can* act as leaders. In fact, they *must* provide leadership if projects are to succeed.

Mastering Project Leadership

Project leadership is about shaping a team of diverse individuals -- employers and contractors alike -- into a force that produces measurable project results. Companies must recruit and develop project managers who can provide the leadership that complex IT projects require. How does one spot these leadership skills?

For project managers to become project leaders, they must demonstrate competence in

- leading courageously;
- influencing others; and
- acting with resilience.

Leading Courageously

Large IT projects have a huge resource pool representing different organizations and job roles. Each resource may require slightly different tasks and may not all be aligned with project goals. Plus, there may be numerous issues and risks that make it difficult to spot the tasks that are most critical.

In this kind of environment, courageous leaders are paramount. Leading courageously means clarifying what is important and taking a stand to resolve those issues. It also requires driving hard on the right issues and confronting problems promptly. Finally, courageous project leadership means being decisive and challenging others to make tough choices.

Influencing Others

The ability to influence others is especially useful for those with large project teams, numerous stakeholders, and different user communities. Influencing others means giving compelling reasons for ideas and suggestions, and winning support from others, both within the project

team and in the user and stakeholder community.

It also requires the ability to negotiate persuasively and get others to take action. Finally, it means influencing the decisions of upper management, whether within your own organization or the client organization.

Acting With Resilience

Being resilient is especially important when projects are at critical stages or in trouble. A project manager who acts with resilience keeps the focus relentlessly on project goals.

Sometimes it means being tough enough, in the face of adversity, to fight the good fight and get agreement on issues that threaten to derail the project. Or it may simply require being flexible enough to negotiate solutions that keep driving for the goal of project success, when others might give up and accept defeat.

Putting the Two Together

Successful project managers *must* lead courageously and be able to influence others to resolve some of the most critical problems that projects experience. To paraphrase Churchill, they must never, ever give up; they must act with resilience even in the face of conflict and problems.

While certified PMPs have a proven set of critical management skills, it's the collection of attributes that make up a good leader that can set a project on the right path. By assigning project managers who can lead effectively, you put your mission-critical IT projects on the road to success. **ECT**

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