Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects
This Project Needs a Leader – Now!

What Matters Most?

Technical competency is not the most important skill for a project manager. Neither is building a good schedule, nor monitoring issues and tracking down open action items. First and foremost, project managers must be effective leaders.

I can't overstate the importance of leadership skills for a project manager. In 1998, Zimmer and Yasin studied the characteristics of effective senior project managers. [1] Eight of the top nine characteristics are aspects of managing relationships or leading. Technical competence is the lone exception on the list (see table 1).

Rank	Characteristic
1	Leads by example
2	Visionary
3	Technically competent
4	Decisive
5	Good communicator
6	Good motivator
7	Stands up to upper management when necessary
8	Supportive of team members
9	Encourages new ideas

Table 1: Characteristics of Effective Senior Project Managers

Zimmer and Yasin identify poor leadership as a cause of project failure, and they conclude that project managers must combine technical competency with the ability to lead. I agree. The more responsibility a project manager has, the more crucial leadership skills are to his or her success.

What Is Leadership, Anyway?

In *Fast Forward MBA in Project Management*, Eric Verzuh says, "Leadership is difficult to define but critical to project success." [2] Although leadership skills are critical for project managers, the Project Management Institute's standards do not explain how to excel at leadership.

However, other research is available to guide us. For example, Daniel Goleman's work on leadership is often cited. Goleman defines leadership as *inspiring* and *guiding*, which includes these four aspects:

1. Articulating and arousing enthusiasm for a shared mission and vision
2. Stepping forward to lead as needed, regardless of position
3. Guiding the performance of others while holding them accountable
4. Leading by example [3]

These four aspects of leadership directly correspond with many of the characteristics of excellent project managers from Zimmer and Yasin's survey.

Leadership vs. Management

Leading is different than managing. Management expert Peter Drucker says, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." Leading focuses on guiding and inspiring; managing involves organizing and effectiveness. Effective project managers must be good at both to be

able to deal with the fast pace and complexity of modern projects. Below, I've listed important aspects of leadership and management to show how they complement each other.

Leadership Skills on a Project
1. Articulate a project vision and build enthusiasm for it.
2. Empower and guide the project team
3. Build relationships to communicate, motivate, and influence
4. Create a positive team environment that helps the team: • Navigate change • Take prudent risks • Listen well, work together, and respect each other • Create an identity and take healthy pride in its work

Management Skills on a Project
1. Keep the project aligned with business strategy, and with customers and users
2. Acquire and coordinate people and resources needed by project
3. Use appropriate project management tools and processes
4. Plan, monitor, and steer the project work, including schedule and budget
5. Manage risks

Take Action

Harold S. Geneen, former CEO of ITT, said, "Leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and in actions." Take action now by trying one of the following ideas.

1 **Get healthy.** A leader is nothing without a team. Creating a healthy team environment should be near the top of your priority list. Take the time out of your busy schedule to attend to the health of the team.

- Foster an environment that embraces learning, a willingness to take prudent risks, and a unique team identity.
- Recognize and support individual team members, treating them with respect. Stand up for them – the workplace can be brutal - and don't work them to the point of burnout.

2 **Cast a vision.** Maintain a constant and clear focus on the desired outcome of the project and the path to get there. Seeing the vision allows the project team to focus on day-to-day activities, knowing that they are in alignment and that their individual work will come together to make something great.

Casting the Vision

A traveler in medieval France was walking down a road at noon when he encountered a man chiseling a large stone. "What are you doing?" the traveler asked. The stonemason replied, "I am preparing this stone to go into a wall." His question answered, the traveler moved on. Around the next bend in the road, he saw another worker chiseling a stone. Again the traveler asked, "What are you doing?" The second stonemason proudly replied, "Sir, this stone will fit into the north wall of a new cathedral." Snapping almost to attention, he continued, "I am building a cathedral to the glory of God!" The two stonemasons were doing the same work, but gave very different replies. Who cast the more compelling vision?

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3 Walk the talk. Demonstrate follow-through yourself. Then give team members the support they need to deliver on their responsibilities, and hold them accountable.

4 Empower others. Accomplish results through the project team rather than doing everything yourself. Leaders learn to discern when to lead the charge personally and when to delegate and then get out of the way.

5 Show enthusiasm! Even during those times when your personal energy has ebbed, keep the team focused and moving forward. Verzuh says, "The energy, attitude, and commitment of the team rarely rise above those of the leader." [4]

Endpoint

Project managers face a high standard – being both a good leader and a skillful manager. Even very experienced project managers have room to grow better. The stakes are high, as the survey by Zimmer and Yasin shows. Therefore, I challenge you to pick just one aspect of your project leadership to improve *now*. When you've made progress on that aspect, advance to another. That first small step will start you on a rewarding, career-long journey of continuous improvement as a leader.

> " **The very essence of leadership is that you have to have vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet."**
>
> - Theodore M. Hesburgh

For Further Reference

[1] Zimmerer, TW, Yasin, MM (1998), "A leadership profile of American project managers," Project Management Journal, Vol. 29 pp. 31–8.

[2] Verzuh, Eric, *Fast Forward MBA in Project Management, 3rd edition*, Wiley, p. 260.

[3] Goleman, Daniel, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, NY, Random House, 1998; quoted in Anthony Mersino, *Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers,* p. 159.

[4] Verzuh, Eric, *Fast Forward MBA in Project Management, 3rd edition*, Wiley, p. 263.

[5] Mersino, Anthony, *Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers*.

About the Author

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