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THE STRATEGIC PROJECT LEADER

Introduction

Projects are essential to the growth and survival of organizations today. Projects create value in the form of new products and services as a response to changes in the business environment, competition and the marketplace. Executives are responsible for managing change and many are adopting the practice of enterprise portfolio management in an attempt to invest in the right mix of projects and enterprise program management to convert opportunity to results. To lead the charge, strong project leadership is vital.

Project-driven organizations develop a portfolio of valuable projects that collectively form the road map to successfully achieving strategies. Executives spend a great deal of time identifying which projects may offer the greatest rewards with minimal risks. With so much riding on successful projects, the project manager has risen to the role of strategic implementer and cross-functional project teams have become management's strategic tool to convert strategy to action.

The emergence of project management as a critical business practice is resulting in a transition from the traditional stovepipe, function-centric structures to the project-centric workplace. Work has been transformed from multiple workers performing a single task, to teams that perform multiple activities on multiple projects. Rather than undertaking only a small number of projects, today's organizations are engaged in virtually hundreds of ongoing projects of varying sizes, durations, and levels of complexity.

It is through projects that organizations add value to better serve their clients and compete in the marketplace. Therefore, it is through the talents and competencies of the project manager that organizations realize their goals. The performance of the project manager is more critical than ever to achieve project profitability and, in turn, organizational prosperity.

The New Project Leader

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Once a company's leadership team has developed a portfolio of valuable projects, the focus is on flawless project execution to maximize project profitability and the return on project investments. All too often, success is elusive. Projects are late, over budget, or may never even be delivered. Sometimes work is incomplete, does not meet requirements or expectations, and does not deliver the benefits or returns on investment expected by the organization.

It is not enough for executive teams to just select the right mix of projects to achieve their strategic imperatives. Executive teams must also establish organizational capabilities to deliver. Executives must ensure that project teams are capable of contributing to the success of their organization. For project success, several elements are essential:

- Effective and targeted project management processes, tools, and techniques,
- Appropriate executive decision making at key control gates,
- High-performing teams, and
- *Exceptional project leadership.*

Where do we get these exceptional project leaders? As the project management discipline matures into a strategic business practice, so must our project managers evolve into strategic leaders of change.

The Spur-of-the-Moment Project Manager

All too often, especially in IT, expertise in the technical area of the project is the key requirement for the position of project manager. In this case, project management is treated as a subset of the technical discipline. Time and again, the projects experience difficulties — not from lack of technical expertise, but from an inability to manage the politics, secure the appropriate resources, and build high-performing teams. There is often a low tolerance for technical failure and a high tolerance for cost overruns and schedule delays.

As projects become larger, cross-functional, global, and more complex, organizations are realizing that project management skills are indispensable and often inadequate. The focus is often on quantitative skills such as cost management, schedule management, quality control, scope management, and configuration management. Technically competent engineers make the professional transition to the discipline of project management as a by-product of their technical mastery. These project managers tend to focus on the tools and techniques to plan projects, estimate costs and resource requirements, issue requests for proposals, award contracts, and monitor and control issues and risks – the guts of project management. Often these individuals play a dual leadership role on projects — that of technical lead and project manager. Inevitably, after the initial planning activities are complete and the project plan is being executed, the technical activities tend to win the majority of the project manager's attention.

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It is now becoming clear that the technical project management knowledge areas are necessary, but not sufficient for successfully managing large, enterprise-wide, complex, mission-critical projects that are the norm today.

The Rise of the Strategy-focused Project Leader

As programs and projects are launched to realize critical strategic goals, the project manager of strategic initiatives should be looked upon as the executive officer of a small enterprise. Just as a business leader must be multi-skilled and strategically focused, a project leader must possess a broad range of knowledge and skills including competence in:

- Technical areas of the project
- Project management
- People management
- Team building
- General management (e.g., marketing, finance)
- Organizational behavior
- Political maneuvering
- Change management
- Strategic alignment
- Conflict management
- Negotiating
- Communications
- Complexity management
- Integration

In contemporary businesses today, the need for effective team leadership is often undervalued. Technology, techniques, and tools are not the reason projects fail. Projects fail because of *people*. Team leadership is different from traditional management and teams are different from operational work groups. It is no longer about control and *management*. It is more about collaboration, consensus, and *leadership*.

Team leaders must have an understanding of how teams work and the dynamics of team development. They must develop specialized skills that are used to build high-performing teams. Traditional managers and technical leads cannot necessarily become effective team leaders without appropriate training and coaching.

It is often stated that project management is 80% art and 20% science. Yet we focus on the science because, as challenging as it is, that is the easy part. Current trends in critical projects are towards global initiatives, virtual teams, mergers and acquisitions, downsizing and reengineering, alliances and partnerships — linking companies in new

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ways. The *Future of Project Management*, a research report by the Project Management Institute (1999), states, "The implication is that cross-cultural training and awareness, interpersonal skills, and language facility will grow as conditions for professional success." (p. 6)

From Project Manager to Team Leader

Today's cross-functional project teams are comprised of a set of multi-skilled subject matter experts (SME) who are brought together because their collective expertise is needed to create an integrated, innovative solution. It is through this cross-disciplined collaboration that innovation and creativity thrives. By their very nature, the multi-skilled SMEs have widely varying personalities and work styles. Yet the team leader must ensure that the group is effective.

Everyone in the group must be able to influence decisions. Team members must leave their titles at the door because power differentials work against team effectiveness. Members must be willing to challenge ideas, accept differences, and listen to new approaches. The team leader must become concerned if ideas are not discussed and challenged sufficiently. The team leader must also model behaviors and coach team members to act as high-performing and fully committed team members.

An effective team leader exploits the synergies of a shared leadership model and mentors others in the process. Leadership expands and contracts as the team and situation dictates. The shared leadership model calls for a collaborative approach, each taking the lead when a particular expertise is needed to guide decision making. At the same time, the team leader must not only be aware of where the project is and where it needs to go, he must be aware of where the team is and where it needs to go on its journey to becoming a high-performing team.

Exploit the Synergies of Shared Leadership

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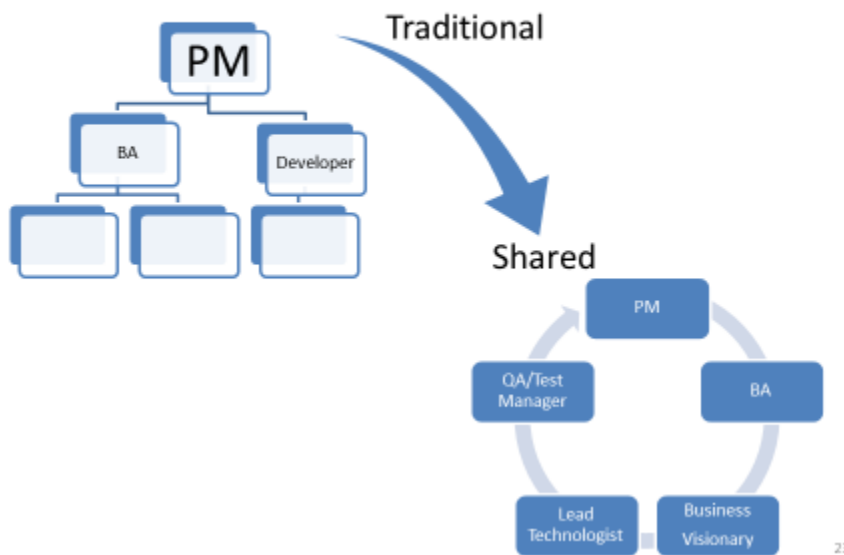
High-performing teams are unstoppable. Consider the nature of high-performing teams such as paramedic, firefighter, U.S. Navy SEAL, and NBA basketball teams. What do they have in common? Qualities such as these:

♦ Multi-skilled

♦ Highly trained and practiced

♦ Small in number

♦ Play their positions

♦ Back up others who need help

♦ Help new team members make entry

♦ Do whatever it takes to achieve the goal

♦ Help drive discipline into the group

♦ Help create climate of trust

♦ Turn diversity to advantage

♦ Strengthen the leader

Leading Teams

All teams are groups, but all groups are not teams. Teams are much more effective than groups. An often used definition of a team put forth by Katzenbach and Smith in *The Wisdom of Teams* appears below:

"A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."

Factors that are present in effective teams include:
- Leadership
- Common goals
- Respect for differences
- Constructive conflict resolution
- Mutual trust
- Attention to both team process and project activities
- Power to make decisions
- Open communication
- Collaboration
- Maintenance of individual self esteem
- Interaction and involvement of all members

- Innovation and creativity
- Customer focus
- Mindfulness of quality

The team leader must understand team dynamics and know how to guide the team through the early formation stage to the high-performing stage as quickly as possible. There are many models of team development available for study and guidance. Bruce Tuckman presented an often used model using easily remembered words describing each stage of the model:
- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing
- Adjourning or Transforming

That is not to suggest that team development is linear. Rather, it is dynamic and constantly adjusting to new input into the team. When a new member joins the team, it may revert back to the forming stage for a time. In fact, all stages are always present to some degree, while one tends to be dominant. Each stage has certain roles the team leader must play to maximize team effectiveness.

Team Leadership Roles

An understanding of the importance of leadership skills for project managers is now emerging. It is now considered more appropriate for the project manger to *be aware of* the technical area of the project than to be a technical expert. The project focus is on *business* rather than technical objectives. It is now understood that projects are technical problems solved with human intervention and collaboration.

Behavioral people skills are now considered vital for project success. David C. Kolb, Ph.D. offers a five-stage team development model in *Team Leadership*. Each stage of the model has certain roles the team leader must play to maximize team effectiveness. And each team leader role is accompanied by corresponding skills.

Development Phase	Team Leader Role
TeamBuild	Facilitator
TeamLearn	Mediator
TeamTrust	Coach
TeamWork	Consultant
TeamFlow	Collaborator

Team Development Model, David C. Kolb, Ph.D.

Facilitator

The facilitator provides the foundation for the team to develop. Requirements include understanding group dynamics, running effective meetings, facilitating dialog, and dealing with difficult behaviors. Skills include:

- Understanding individual differences, work styles, and cultural nuances
- Leading discussions and driving group to consensus
- Building a sense of team
- Using and teaching collaborative skills
- Managing meetings
- Initiating projects by facilitating planning workshops

Mediator

Transitioning from facilitator to mediator poses a challenge for new team leaders. It requires the team leader to stop controlling the team and leading the effort. The team leader must be prepared to recognize when conflict is emerging – as it always does in team development – and be able to separate from it to mediate the situation. Although the team leader does not have to resolve the conflict, he must help the team members manage it. Skills include:

- Conflict management and resolution
- Problem-solving and decision-making techniques
- Idea-generation techniques

Coach

Coaching and mentoring takes place at both the individual and team level. At this stage, trust has been established among team members and communication is open and positive. The coach uses experiences, perceptions, and intuition to help change team member behaviors and thinking. Coaching involves:

- Goal setting
- Teaching others how to give and receive feedback
- Creating a team identity
- Team development

Consultant

As the team begins to work well together, the team leader transitions into the consultant role, providing advice, tools, and interventions to help the team reach its potential. The team leader concentrates on nurturing the team environment and problem solving. This involves:

- Assessing team opportunities
- Supporting and guiding the team to create a positive, effective team environment
- Aligning individual, team, and organizational values and strategic imperatives
- Fostering team spirit

Collaborator

Few teams achieve this level of teamwork and sustain it for long periods of time because it is so intense. At this point, both the work and the leadership is shared equally among team members.
The lead role is handed off to team members as their expertise becomes the critical need during differing project phases. The team lead must learn how to:
- Lead softly
- Share the leadership role
- Assume a peer relationship with team members

The Grooming of the Project Leader

There is no shortage to the roles the leader of teams can play. Some suggest that they are the new wave of management — assuming roles that include sponsor, promoter, chaplain, consoler, trainer, teacher, team member, inventor, and entrepreneur. How can project leaders be all things to all teams?

As with any other leadership role, competency comes from acquiring education and training, seeking out mentoring and coaching, and jumping in head first to learn the discipline.

Leading researchers and scholars consider project management as the way to ensure organizational success. Organizations on the leading edge are improving project performance by better training and equipping their project managers. A project management career path is one key element to retain key project managers while training those who will follow. Enlightened organizations in both the public and private sectors have created cohesive career management plans for project managers to develop their potential, match their skills to assignment, track performance, and reward them appropriately.

At leading companies such as Ernst and Young, attainment of internal project management certification leads to advances in title, accompanied by increased compensation. As people move up the competency model, they are eligible for assignment to larger, more complex projects.

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The Department of Energy (DoE), the CIA, and NASA have established their own project management career development program. These agencies are not only concerned about developing project managers, it is also concerned about keeping them. They do not want their good project managers to be recruited away.

NASA spent almost 15 years developing and improving its Academy of Program and Project Leadership. The result is a commitment to project management throughout the organization. The Academy is structured with four levels of classroom training. Other organizations are coming to the realization that projects are crucial to their success and project leaders must be groomed, developed, recognized, and rewarded.

There are many successful models from which an organization can glean lessons learned when attempting to implement a project management career track. Unfortunately, all too often organizations embark upon professional project management only after a crisis, as was the case with NASA after the Challenger accident, or in conjunction with a major reorganization, as was the case with the merger between Ernst & Young and Cap Gemini. Project-based management represents a fundamental change in the way most organizations do business and how project managers are compensated. The buy-in for major change sometimes comes with significant stress.

Whatever the driver, components of world-class, professional project management career programs include the elements listed below. Smaller companies may not set up an entire career path for just a few project managers, but they can benefit from some of these tools. Organizations of all sizes may want to set up a mentorship program to begin formalizing project management development.
- Formal off-the-shelf and customized training
- Training on the job
- Certifications based on education, testing, and experience
- Mentorship program
- Evaluation and compensation methods
- Suitable titles and advancement opportunities