

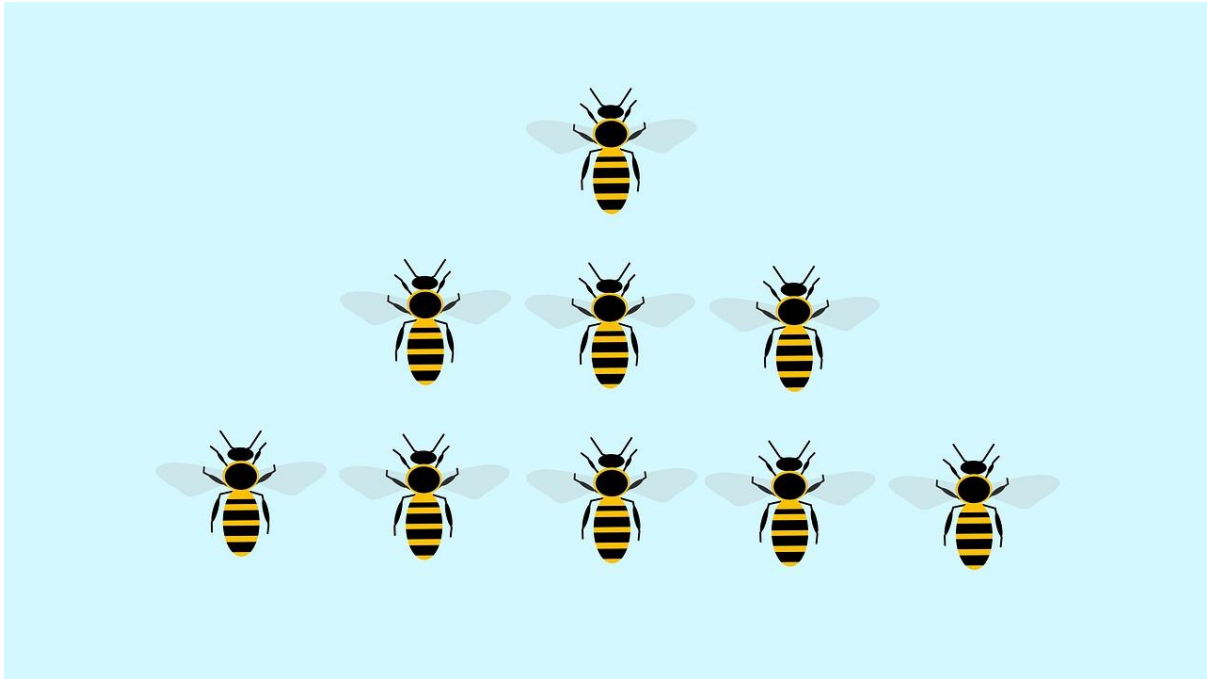
Moving from Project Manager to Project Leader

(And We Need Both)

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The case for project leaders

Over recent years, the nature of projects has been changing. Managing them is generally getting harder as projects become ever more:

- Complex
- Specialist based
- Virtual and diverse, geographically spread
- VUCA
- Fast paced
- Low margin
- Replete with large amounts of information (and now AI)

For some of us, we may have been relying on our “technical” skills to manage our projects, for example in

- Planning
- Risk management
- Project controls

The changes identified above suggest that if we aspire to deliver successful projects, we need to shift the emphasis and become more leader than manager.

The difference between project management and project leadership

We could define project management as, “the application of processes, methods, knowledge, skills and experience to achieve the project objectives”.

Typical project management tasks include the following.

- Planning
- Managing risks
- Ensuring standards are applied
- Co-ordinating
- Keeping the project on time and to budget
- Controlling or managing change
- Ensuring the project delivers the expected outcomes and benefits

We could define a project leader as one who has, “the ability to establish vision and direction to influence and align others towards a common purpose, and to empower and inspire people to achieve success”.

The three elements of our definition are being able to:

- Identify and articulate the goal
- Bring everyone together in service of the goal
- Enable, empower and inspire (and develop and nurture) everyone to be able to do so

From this we can observe that actually, leadership is largely relational (and personal) as all of these involve relational skills.

Of course, both managers and leaders are needed, and you can be excellent or poor at either. One is not morally better or inherently more desirable than the other and indeed, sometimes there is crossover.

But given the picture we have painted of modern projects, we can ask, what do we need most: managers or leaders?

Moving from project manager to project leader

So, how do we move from project manager to project leader? We'll have a brief look at these in the rest of our article.

Expand your perspective

As humans, it's very hard not to see the world only through our own eyes. And this is especially hard in the fast-paced, swiftly-changing world of projects. However, as leaders, a key skill is being able to lift our heads, and look wider and further.

Part of doing this is thinking more strategically about goals and vision and expanding your perspective means thinking not just about the project but strategically.

It also means thinking not just in the short term but in the longer term, and thinking not just about what is, but what could be.

Expanding our perspective is also about thinking not just from our own perspective but also to encompass the perspective and roles of your team, your organisation and other stakeholders in the project.

Think in terms of team results

It is true that as a leader, you can't do much on your own. To demonstrate this, ask yourself "what if I led but nobody followed"?

We therefore need to pay a good deal of attention to enabling our whole team to perform.

To do this, we need to think about ourselves as leaders, the individual team members and the team as a whole.

Firstly, as a leader, you need to prepare yourself. Ask:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Where are you willing and resisting this approach?
- What demands will come upon you throughout the project?
- Which of these can you meet and where do you need to plug gaps?

Secondly, you need to prepare your individual team members. Ask these same questions of each of them.

Finally, the whole team needs to work well together, so for the integrated team, we ask:

- How collaborative are they at the moment?
- What demands will come upon the team as a unit?
- Which of these can they meet (as a unit) and where do you need to plug gaps?

Additional questions include:

- What are the development needs and potential of individual team members?
- What are the strategic challenges and opportunities for your project(s)?
- What are the longer-term changes you need to make to improve the performance of your project(s)?

Understand the value of developing future leaders

At some time in the future, we will move on, and we need future leaders to replace us.

Thinking selfishly, if there's nobody to replace us, it's harder to move on to something better. eventually, we will have to move on, even if it's by retirement.

We also need to do it for the sake of the future leaders – so that they can step up to the plate, and can achieve their own goals, aspirations and dreams – and for the benefit of the organisation as a whole.

Finally, we need our future leaders to be experienced and ready to hit the ground running, and part of this is trying to anticipate the skills required in the future.

What can you do in order to prepare for the future?

Is it about identifying and developing future leaders? If so, what assignments and responsibilities do you need to give them? Where do you need to encourage them?

Is this about making yourself less critical? If so, what is stopping you doing this? Fear? Lack of opportunity?

Commit to people and relationships

The larger part of your role as a leader is focused directly on people: your relationships with them and the relationships between them. The best way to approach this is to commit to these people and these relationships.

The word “commit” contains ideas of being intentional, being persistent, or of prioritising something over other things. In our context, this means resolving to work primarily through the medium of people in order to achieve project success, and to give high priority to the quality of the relationships in order to do so.

As a starter, try asking what should I do differently in order to do commit? This could be in you, in your team or in your organisation.

This takes persistence, as some will follow you more easily in this than others, and anyway, you have to get them all to do it together. It is also a maintenance job, requiring constant attention.

Nurturing emotional quality

We can define emotional intelligence or emotional quality as the:

“Ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour”.

People with high emotional quality can:

- Recognize their own emotions and those of others
- Use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour
- Discern between different feelings and label them appropriately
- Adjust emotions to adapt to environments

It is also recognised that successful leaders possess a high degree of emotional capability.

Some ways that we can nurture emotional quality include:

- Practice observing how you feel
- Pay attention to how you behave
- Question your own opinions
- Take responsibility for your feelings

- Take time to celebrate the positive feelings and events
- Don't ignore the negative – notice, capture and reflect on these feelings and events
- When emotions arise, don't react immediately but pause, think and then respond

Remember that this takes time and needs attention, practice and discipline.

Consider client relationships

Our client relationships are critical, because clients are key stakeholders who:

- Will benefit from the project
- Can support and enhance the project
- Have risks from and pose risks to the project

We can use traditional stakeholder analysis to help us with this, for example by assessing power, interest and attitude of each client, and identifying an engagement strategy for each.

In addition to this, it may be especially helpful to ask yourself where the problems, risks and opportunities lie for your clients.

Consider the organisational perspective

We are normally part of an organisation and the projects that we lead are there to serve organisational goals.

Therefore, we do well to consider ourselves, our teams and our projects from an organisational perspective. This brings context and aligns purpose.

You can get a better view of this by putting yourself in the “shoes” of the organisation. For example, imagine that you were the chief executive of your organisation and ask yourself:

- What do you want from your project (outputs, outcomes and benefits)?
- How does it fit into the wider organisation picture?
- What would they expect of you and your team?
- What do you need to change in order to come more into line with this?

This isn't a one-sided thing. You can also ask questions of the organisation, for example, what does the organisation need to change to do things better?

In this article, we have been considering how to move from a project manager to a project leader.



Not much of this is easy and not much of this is quick. However, it is critical to project success, and therefore to bringing value to stakeholders and satisfaction to yourself and the other project team members.

Leadership thrives when there are difficult things to be done. You don't have to accept things as they are. As a leader you can change the future.

P P P M Project Management Services LLC

P P P M Project Management Services LLC has been delivering projects for many years. We are also letting others into the secret, by helping them to do their projects better. Our services range from traditional consulting, where we advise and support an organisation on its project process; review projects at all stages of delivery, where we suggest improvement or recovery actions; training, mentoring and coaching, where we empower your workforce; through to providing experienced personnel to manage projects directly. Our clients span sectors and reach across the globe. We have advised at many levels within these organisations and try to ensure that our services are a fit to the needs of our clients. Contact us now to discuss your project management needs.



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