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A View into Project Leadership

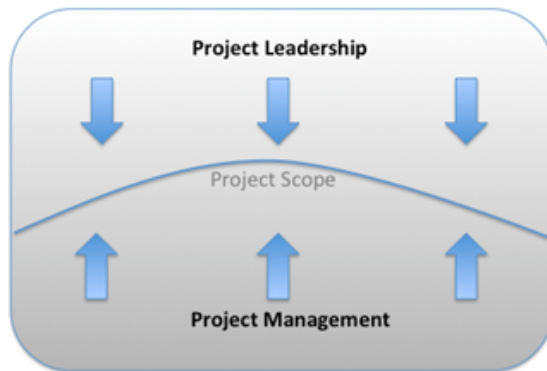
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By *Tim Jaques, PMP*

Federal agencies have never relied more on project management than they do today. Projects are a critical way for agencies to achieve results. Yet a crisis is emerging across the federal sector – one that threatens to undermine even the most competent practitioners of project management. That crisis is ineffectual project leadership.

Much has been written about the discipline and practice of project management, and an entire industry has been built around managing projects. Projects, by necessity, require a proactive approach to tasks, risks, resources, budgets, and the like. This close-hand-on-the-tiller approach is essential to project success because projects tend to require a strong managerial focus. But where does leadership come in?

One way to differentiate between project management and project leadership is to ask: ***Is the activity above the horizon line or below?***



To understand the "above the horizon" activities, one needs to understand what defines the project horizon. The horizon is a singular line in the distance that represents the furthest direct line of sight for a project team. For example if we are building a bridge, the project scope and all the known resources available to getting that bridge completed may define the horizon. Management deals with the mechanics of getting to the finish line – the sequence of activities, addressing risks, issues, resource management. Project leadership, then, creates the environment within which projects can succeed. Where project management works "in" the project, project leadership works "on" the project.

One model of project leadership addresses four main areas: Direction, Relationships, Support, and Execution. Leadership in the project setting is akin to having a picnic near a blast furnace. Projects create high-pressure environments that leaders must be able to withstand and even protect. As the table shows, projects leadership entails a range of competencies.

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Leadership Dimension	Example Competencies
Establish Direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architect the solution • Clarify objectives • Set priorities • Delegate assignments
Develop Effective Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence key stakeholders • Create coalitions • Build trust • Resolve conflict
Coach and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate integrity • Champion change • Develop talent • Motivate individuals
Execute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate • Focus on performance • Make decisions • Deliver value

Leaders need followers, and projects have built-in audiences. That is why projects are excellent vessels for leadership learning. Projects create stress, which often brings out the best (and worst) in people. It is within the project gauntlet that leaders are found, as individuals will rise to the occasion in order to see the project through. While some leaders may be expected – project sponsors, the project manager, and executive customer. Other, unexpected individuals may display leadership during the project such as a new team member, subject matter experts, and others.

Project leadership drives project success in a way that project management cannot. For example, when project requirements evolve from their initial inception to the final implemented deliverable, a leader needs to continuously reevaluate the investment to determine if the project still generates the value for the organization.

In May 2010, GAO released an audit of a Department of Veterans' Affairs effort to replace an outpatient scheduling system (**GAO-10-579**). GAO identified weaknesses in several key management elements, including the lack of an acquisition strategy and ineffective risk management. One finding stood out as a failure of leadership:

[A]lthough the department was aware of major issues with the project through several external reviews, the lack of effective institutional oversight allowed the project to continue unchecked and, ultimately, to fail.

The GAO report clearly demonstrates the frequent result of a lack of leadership. Project team members are unable to muster the wherewithal to voice the big issue and determine steps to rectify. Instead, the project limps ahead with fixes, phases and cost overruns.

For their part, the VA has undertaken a massive overhaul of their IT portfolio and project management capabilities. They are in the process of implementing a robust training program that addresses the FAC-P/PM requirements. One element of FAC-P/PM is leadership, and so from the ashes of yesterday will come new leaders, better equipped to handle the challenges both below, and above, the project horizon.

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