



Project Manager Skills Every Leader Should Have

Years ago I decided to completely revamp my standard project management skills training workshop to develop a second version for non project managers because I'd been getting so many requests from non project manager types who had no intention of entering the project management field but just needed the skills on a day to day basis. Looking back it makes complete sense. After all, we're all managing projects weekly, monthly, etc. whether it's developing a marketing plan, launching a new product, hiring a new team, documenting a process, organizing a team event, completing appraisals – the list goes on and on!

As a corporate trainer and team consultant, I've found that the most effective leaders are often those who have also mastered these critical project management skills:

1. **Managing Various Stakeholders** (particularly difficult ones)

Project managers are the proverbial hub in the center of the wheel constantly being pulled on by various different stakeholders with different personalities and interests. They must become masters at managing these different stakeholders and their associated expectations. What an amazing skill that all leaders could benefit from!

Tips for enhancing this skill:

- Learn to listen: really understand your stakeholders and what makes them tick (or what keeps them up at night).
- When working on a major task/project, don't just consider the team most closely associated with it. Early on identify all potential stakeholders (anyone with a stake in the project). Don't shoot yourself in the foot by not initially considering outside groups like Legal or Finance (or even an outside agency like the FDA) for example because they don't seem to be directly associated with it. If you've been asked to lead product development for a new caffeine laced cereal, trust me you want to engage Legal BEFORE there is a problem, not AFTER.
- Customize communications to different stakeholder preferences. Project managers are masters at determining what level of detail/type/format of communication each stakeholder prefers and to the extent possible customizing to each. Figure out early on whether the client/vendor/executive prefers to receive a monthly email summary or be invited to weekly team meetings to obtain status and try to customize to those preferences as much as possible.

2. **Quantifying Risk**

Most of us realize intuitively that there's risk associated with a new endeavor, but all too often we methodically (and quite consciously) plod onto the Titanic, check into our stateroom, take a nap and are shocked when we soon end up scrambling for a life boat. Many leaders have a sick feeling when they're tasked with the impossible or are asked to make organizational changes that don't make sense but inexplicably, they tend to nod, smile and try to figure out how to "make it work". Project managers are adept at quantifying risk (sometimes even before the formal planning phase) to provide opportunities to mitigate risk, redesign/rescope the effort, or even reconsider the initiative overall.

Tips for enhancing this skill:

- Develop a habit of gathering a broad cross section of stakeholders early on to brainstorm and quantify risks.
- Estimate severity for each risk event by multiplying probability times impact (e.g. 25% chance of rain during the company wide event * \$100K impact = \$25K estimated severity).
- Prioritize risks and develop mitigation strategies/back up plans for most severe risks.



3. Encouraging Critique

So many leaders make the classic mistake of getting lathered up about their latest brilliant idea and jumping to execution without actually vetting the idea objectively (no, running it by your mother or spouse doesn't necessarily count ☺). Let's face it – even the leaders who might ask for constructive feedback are unlikely to get much candor. After all, each leader has a pet project – their baby – and no one wants to tell the boss they have an “ugly baby”. So, instead, the project moves forward and becomes a disaster. Project managers are taught to take all projects through the Initiating Phase. This is the first phase of Project Management which occurs even before planning, and the goal is to objectively vet the idea/concept to determine whether it should even become a project (e.g. have resources assigned, etc.) Leaders in general tend to get very little constructive feedback by nature and as a result are much more likely to proceed with ill-conceived ideas.

Tips for enhancing this skill:

- Build vetting into your standard processes for initiating new projects/work efforts. Simpler is often better so don't strive for complexity. Possibly develop a simple one page form where the initiator documents anticipated benefits and costs for the potential effort, then the team reviews and discusses as appropriate.
- Identify someone to play “devil's advocate” during team meetings and rotate the role alphabetically. This will help build a culture where it's not just ok but preferred to pick at an idea a bit before rubber stamping it.
- Don't just tell others that you want constructive feedback, show them. Actively reward those who provide constructive feedback – whether it's a simple heartfelt thanks or \$10 dropped in a special jar for each comment, find a way to provide positive affirmation.

4. Temperature Check Constantly

In many ways project managers are walking thermometers of sorts. Any time they step on an elevator with a stakeholder, they must be prepared to provide a quick synopsis of the status of the project or the project team. They're often asked to compare estimates to actuals, assess status relative to quality, time, cost, (good, fast, and cheap), provide updates on team conflicts or recent problems, etc. Similarly, the best leaders have their fingers on the pulse of the organization – not checking in mid year and at year end, but truly finding ways to keep abreast of status on various initiatives and also maintain an accurate sense of the overall morale of the organization.

Tips for enhancing this skill:

- Build small relationship building elements into most group gatherings. Small consistent efforts can be more impactful than a once a year team retreat.
- Develop agreed upon status elements/success criteria. Status can mean different things to different people so remove the mystery by determining up front which elements are important to define/report out on for key initiatives. If you're most interested in getting regular feedback on defect rates, client satisfaction levels, wait times, actual vs. estimated costs, etc., clearly communicate that early on. Better yet, develop a template for status reporting organization wide.
- Periodically poll the group anonymously to gather tangible feedback to get an authentic sense of morale levels, concerns, etc.

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