

Simple Principles, Complex Projects

The simple principles that make even the most complex projects successful.

By Mark A. Albe

Project team success is ultimately defined by one word—leadership. During his keynote address to the 2008 Project Management Institute (PMI) Global Congress in Denver, CO, General (Retired) Colin Powell stated “Leadership is leadership is leadership” and “the leader’s passion has to be the example of excellence in the organization ...”

Building on these remarks, it is clear that a project leader has to provide the necessary vision and team organization, while empowering and encouraging the project team to make the vision a reality. In addition, communication strategies and channels need to be built into the project organization design to enable information sharing that will help identify and resolve project issues and facilitate the real-time implementation of lessons learned. While this should seem obvious, how many times does a project get off on the wrong foot because a project manager does not take these vital success factors into account? This article details the Project Leadership Model (See Figure 1.) and the basic principles of leadership vision, organizational structure, and communication. It will also validate this model through a relevant case study that you can apply in your everyday role as project leader.

Project Leadership Vision

As a project leader gets geared up to tackle a major project effort, many find it useful to take the opportunity to formalize a Project Charter. The Charter captures key project elements, such as the scope and objectives, stakeholder analysis, and technical scope of work.

Ideally it will also answer the following questions:

- What is the overall vision for this project effort?
- How are we going to accomplish our objectives?
- Who are the necessary team members to surround ourselves with to get the job done?
- What are the potential project risks and how are we going to overcome these challenges?

Leaders that regularly take the time to go through this invaluable exercise are ahead of the game and have also likely executed numerous successful projects, meeting their organization’s expectations and established metrics. Those that have not taken the time to establish and clarify the project vision can easily count off projects that did not run smoothly. Experience shows that having a project vision is the foundation for success.

While the Project Charter process can help facilitate a the formulation of a clear vision of the product or service being created, the hard part for the project leader is communicating the vision and gaining buy in. No matter what or how a leader communicates the project vision, perception of this vision by team members is what will become a reality.

A validated Project Charter process will result in a vision that may be clear to the higher levels of an organization, but what about the execution and project stakeholder level? Often a vision will be accepted at the upper management level that is given a lukewarm reception by those lower down in the organizational hierarchy. One way to mitigate

this potential scenario is to reach out to project stakeholders, peers, and subordinates to ensure the vision can be effectively communicated, and, more importantly, to get their input and secure buy in to make the vision a reality. This process will be the first step in establishing project ownership on the part of team members.

Building the Organization

Simply said, a project leader needs to be proactive in developing the project organization. The project leader must take the necessary steps within organization processes and even constraints to lay the project team foundation that will ultimately result in future project objective attainment.

Once the project vision is established, the project leader’s next step is to build the team that will plan and execute the project. Each organization has certain internal processes, procedures, and resource staffing tools for projects. Living within these organizational methods the project leader has to ensure that the right people with the right skill sets are assigned to the project team. Often, this may be a balancing act, and in reality you may not get everyone you want, but advocating for your people and your project is a critical project leader responsibility.

Successful project leaders will lay the necessary organization planning ground work during the project authorization (Project Charter) and vision creation process. The project leader will also strategically reach out and involve targeted potential team members before building the actual project organization. These preliminary efforts will likely result in at least some or preferably most

of your project team members buying into, and owning, the project vision.

As previously stated, the actual project organization design has to fully enable the project vision. There are numerous organization models that a project team can be assembled into (functional, divisional, matrix, etc.), but the point is that the project leaders need to develop an organizational solution that works. The project leader also needs to empower team members to develop the organization chart and appropriately challenge the product as necessary throughout the project's duration. The key principle is that through team empowerment, the project leader builds off a common project team vision and gives the project team ownership for this critical organizational development task.



Figure 1. Project Leadership Model

Power of Communication

Much has been written about the importance of communication and the critical factor it plays in the success or failure of a project. As a project leader you need to ensure that communication processes are not only built into the organization structure, but are also utilized and effective.

As a project leader if you were able to establish a vision, get people to buy into the vision, and establish ownership, you are probably a pretty good communicator. But this is not enough.

A project leader needs to ensure that project team organization communication happens both internally and externally, is timely, and is appropriate. There are numerous communication tools to apply such as meetings (planned and unplanned), meetings minutes with action item assignments, email, project

reports, milestones, etc.; but one communication channel that a project leader cannot overlook is the power of face to face communication. Given technological communication advancements we probably do not take the time to go meet with people and have a face to face discussion. It is a lot easier and even cost effective to just "shoot an email," use text or instant messaging, have a conference call, etc.; but in-person interaction is still the most powerful communication method. Project leaders need to check in with their project team members and stakeholders and also encourage this type of activity by the project task leaders. A tremendous amount of value is achieved through a personal communication. It provides an opportunity for interaction, allows people

to express themselves and contribute, and just as importantly, makes people feel like valued project team members. The other added benefit is a renewed sense of ownership that was first established in the vision and team forming process.

The other critical, and unfortunately often overlooked, aspect of communication is listening, both to the spoken and unspoken word. Truly effective communication is the balance of information giving and information receiving. Project leaders need to listen and also build in the organization structure an environment of listening and feedback loops. All too often we feel like we have done our job as project leader by communicating necessary project information to our team members so they can accomplish their tasks. But a project leader also needs to listen and provide opportunities for feedback. According

to Peter Drucker, "the most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said." Look out for the most visible signs gained through your communication plan, but also keep an ear to the ground for what is not said or reported. Communication will make or break a project. Build it into the project design and openly value the power of listening.

The following case study clearly demonstrates how the concepts of vision, organization, and communication were incorporated into a recent major project effort for the Department of Defense (DoD) Environmental Cleanup program. Through the application of the simple project leadership principles outlined above, project leaders were able to overcome significant information challenges and achieve meaningful results.

The Environmental Information Challenge

Since 2001, the DoD Environmental Programs group has executed several nationwide inventory initiatives to establish a comprehensive list of former training lands potentially requiring environmental investigation and cleanup due to the historical use of military munitions. Despite the generally accepted assumption that the military maintained accurate training records, many environmental project leaders executing these inventory efforts have experienced difficulty unlocking relevant site information. Reliable information firmly establishing former training locations, military munitions usage, and duration, all key in the establishment of a defensible environmental Conceptual Site Model (CSM), are not readily available. These challenges are not necessarily due to information classification restrictions (i.e., Secret, Confidential, etc.), rather there is just not a single repository archival record group that holds all the answers. To overcome these important data gap challenges project leaders from national environmental engineering and consulting firm Malcolm Pirnie, Inc. (www.pirnie.com), have been forced to think "outside of the box" in creating a vision for project organization, designing execution strategies, and developing effective communication processes. The

result of this effort is the innovative development of an integrated research and information sharing approach that has resulted in relevant and defensible data, closing significant data gaps.

Integrated Archival Approach

Archival research encompassing a national, state, and local component is not new. The United States Army Corps of Engineers has long established effective archival search processes and subsequent archival search reports in support of environmental program execution. In fact, the Interstate Technology and Regulatory Council recently developed a historic records review model for environmental program research that has been adapted by the Army. These methodologies are effective and have produced notable results.

However, Malcolm Pirnie project leaders on this effort found that data gaps could be further reduced and a higher percentage of relevant documentation could be realized by integrating the archive search resource team and the project execution team.

The catalyst for this creative approach to resolving informational data gaps was the execution of the Army Inventory. Unlike prominent Army installations (past and present), a population of these former training ranges dates back to the late 1800's, had fairly limited usage, and have fallen out of public memory. In addition, the availability/quality of archival records varies tremendously. Therefore, the primary data gap challenge faced by the project team is not only locating training records, but also

determining a definable site location that could be the basis for future environmental responses (as needed).

To overcome this significant challenge, the project leadership team from Malcolm Pirnie along with its Army counterparts envisioned a multi-phased research approach and a supporting project team organization that integrated the archival research experts with the "on the ground" execution teams. This project vision was discussed before kickoff for feedback and upon acceptance was incorporated in the overall Project Management Plan. The project team also created a special project resource point of contact to help facilitate communication between these project team entities. In addition, a "real time" archival information feedback loop was built into the process approach so that needed adjustments could be made quickly and productive archival record group repositories could be identified and searched.

Project Results


The project team integrated archival approach has resulted in the identification of sites not previously identified by the Army. The improved data gained through this approach has also yielded enhanced project field site visits and the positive identification of existing range areas and features after more than a half century or more of non-use. The project teams have been able to develop defensible environmental preliminary assessments that will become the foundation of future environmental investigation efforts. The Army has also gained a bet-

ter perspective of future environmental liabilities and will be able to accurately forecast funding for this next phase. Lastly, the Army project team was able to reduce overall program costs and the complete the program ahead of schedule.

Summary

This case study clearly demonstrates how the project team was able to overcome anticipated project issues and develop a creative approach for successful project execution. The project leadership team undertook the following critical project activities:

- **Project Vision**—Integrated archival approach, acceptance through the Project Charter, Kickoff meeting, and incorporated into the Project Management Plan.
- **Organization**—Establishment of a Project Resource to enable data sharing and communication between the archival team resources and the project execution and field teams.
- **Communication**—Design and implementation of an archival information feedback loop, regular data review sessions, and lessons learned application.

Project vision, organization, and communication are simple principles that project leaders should seriously consider and include in their overall project efforts. 

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