



What is Project Leadership?

Based on [1]

Lots of publications in the project management field refer to the term “project leadership”. Often the definition is insufficient or not existing. This short article focuses on the definition of project leadership behaviors and provides an example how different leadership behaviors apply to different project phases.

What is project leadership? Project Managers manage projects and people. This role requires management and leadership skills where the emphasize lies on managing the project data and leading the project team members.

How can leadership and management be differentiated? Leaders often establish direction for the future, communicate through vision, and forge aligned high-performance teams [2]. The Project manager’s “leadership function” is specifically used to communicate the project vision [3].

Managers mainly focus on planning and short-term horizons, devise processes and structures, and solve problems [2]. The project manager plans a project, measures project performance and solves any roadblock issues.

Common leadership styles

Management and leadership style can vary. Some of the main leadership styles are summarized in Table 1. A style can be referred to as a way of behavior.

Leadership Style	Description
Charismatic	Charismatic Leaders possess a very persuasive personality that attracts followers through charm. These leaders show great confidence in their followers and create a group image that is far superior to all others.
Participative	Participative Leaders seek to involve other people in the decision process, possibly including subordinates, peers, superiors and other stakeholders.

Situational	Situational Leaders do not just have a single preferred leadership style. Factors that affect situational decisions include motivation and capability of followers.
Transactional	Transactional leaders create clear structures that make clear what is required of their subordinates. These leaders reward subordinates who following orders. When things go wrong, then the subordinates are considered to be personally at fault, and are punished for their failure.
Transformational	Transformational leaders have a vision for the future that will excite and convert potential followers. These leaders try to convince others of their vision. They are always visible and act as role model. They also make continued efforts to motivate and rally their followers, constantly doing the rounds, listening, soothing and enthusing.
Autocratic	Autocratic leaders make decisions without consulting with others or considering any other view.
Democratic	Democratic leaders involve all people in the decision-making, although the process for the final decision may vary from the leader having the final say to them facilitating consensus in the group.
Laissez Faire	Leaders with a Laissez Faire leadership style minimize their involvement in decision-making, and hence allowing people to make their own decisions, although they may still be responsible for the outcome.

Table 1: Summary of different leadership styles [4], [5].

Leaders can adapt to different styles but need to make sure to stay their true self.

Kippenberger [6] states “how we lead is a reflection of our own character, personally and experience.” Leaders need to understand who they are in order to be able to adapt to different leadership styles. Projects with their unpredictable nature require leaders that are able to adapt to different leadership styles.

Project management is a team-based approach. Hence the project scope and project plan cannot be defined and developed in isolation. Autocratic leaders would come up with a plan for the team without consulting the team members. Leaders with a laissez faire leadership style would let the team figure out how to respond to the challenges of a project without providing any guidelines. Although leadership styles like the autocratic or laissez faire leadership behaviour can be observed in some organization they are not well suited for leading projects and project team members.

Democratic leaders go through an elaborate decision finding process that involves several stakeholders of different organizational background and levels. As a result democratic leadership behaviour often leads to extreme delays in large projects, because all team members get involved in every decision process of a project. The more people are part of a project team the longer it takes until a decision is made.

Charismatic leadership works often well at the beginning of a project when it is important to get support from the overall organization. Charismatic leaders are driven by their believe that their vision is correct. Hence Charismatic leadership works as long as the leader's vision is aligned with the project and organizational goals.

Participative, situational, transactional and transformational leadership styles seem to work most effective when managing projects and leading people. Participative leaders typically seek other people views and opinions in order to form their own opinion about a situation and then make their decision. Project sponsors, for example, often make their decision after listening to multiple people in the organization. Blanchard [7] describes the situational leadership model which includes four different leadership behaviours that are dependent on the maturity and knowledge of the employee. These are telling, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Project teams include members of different backgrounds and experiences requiring different management styles. Situational leadership seems to fit the changing nature of a project very well. Burns [8] differentiates between transactional and transformational leadership behaviours. Transactional leaders communicate clear goals to their subordinates. This leadership style relies on organizational structures and processes to help resolve problems [6]. Well organized projects have a structure in place that allows the project teams to solve problems. Transactional leadership works well for some aspects of a project such as e.g.: managing changes through a change management committee. Transformational leadership style empowers people to do their work. Transformational leaders facilitate the process of people to learn and to seek change and improvement [6]. In general this leadership style is most applicable for organizations that manage projects through self-managed teams [9].

Common leadership roles in projects

Most projects require leadership from the executive sponsor and an experienced project manager. The role of project manager and executive sponsor changes in the course of the project phases.

	Initiating	Planning	Executing	Closing
Executive Sponsor's Primary Role	Reflect his/her vision in project charter. Sells project to other organizational leaders to get buy in.	Coaches project manager and team in the planning effort.	Holds the team accountable for results. Makes project related decisions.	Makes sure that the project finishes strong. Rewards team for successful delivery.
Executive Sponsor's Leadership Behavior	Transformational leadership style.	Transformational and situational leadership style	Situational and transactional leadership style.	Transactional leadership style.
Project Manager's Primary Role	Not existing	Translates project charter into project plan. Helps team to define ground rules for team communication.	Drives project execution. Encourages information flow and team work.	Makes sure that deliverables meet stakeholder expectations and get formally approved.
Project Manager's Leadership Behavior	Not existing	Participative and situational leadership style.	Situational leadership style.	Transactional leadership style.

Table 2: Roles and leadership styles for project leaders based on [10].

Table 2 relates each project phase (Initiating, Planning, Executing and Closing) to the key the role of the two main project leadership roles: project sponsor and project manager and their primary leadership style behavior.

For more details or any questions about project leadership please feel free to contact sonja@interglobeconsulting.com or +1.408.807.0443.

References:

- [1] KOPPENSTEINER S., Leadership concepts in software project management, proceedings of IDIMT 2008, Czech Republic.
- [2] ENGLUND R.L., BUCERO A., Project Sponsorship, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, USA, 2006.
- [3] FLANNES S. W., LEVIN G., Essential people skills for project managers, Management Concepts, Virginia, USA, 2001.

- [4] CHANGINGMINDS.ORG, website
http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/styles/leadership_styles.htm, 2008.
- [5] GOLEMAN, website
http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_goleman_leadership_styles.html , 2008.
- [6] KIPPENBERGER T., Leadership Styles, Capstone Publishing, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2002.
- [7] BLANCHARD K., Management of Organizational Behavior: Leading Human Resources, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, USA, 2000.
- [8] MACGREGOR BURNS J., Leadership, Harpercollins, New York, USA, 1979.
- [9] BYHAM W.C., ZAPP The lightening of Empowerment, Ballantine Publishing Group, Toronto, Canada, 1998.
- [10] KOPPENSTEINER S., Process Mapping and Simulation for Software Projects, VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2008.