

Role of leadership in projects

 By Louise Worsley

22 Feb 2013

When reviewing the nature of leadership in projects, as to how far leadership responsibilities of the sponsor or business owner extend and what leadership role should the project manager adopt, it is often helpful use the metaphor of a taxi driver.

Project managers may drive the taxi, but they will not be successful without directions from the passenger on the target destination. Far too often project managers drive the taxi without sufficient engagement with the passenger, or worse still, in their excitement about the destination, get in the back with them! By the time the taxi comes to a stop, the passenger has already jumped out and there is nobody to pay the fare.

In reality, the causes of project challenges are complex. Sometimes the passenger (ie sponsor) never wanted to be in the taxi in the first place, the person in the back may change several times during the journey, or the back of the taxi is so crowded with passengers that they simply cannot agree on where they want to go.

However, the project manager cannot drive the project and sit in the back seat as the client. In projects, the leadership role of the project manager must be focused on 'action' leadership while the sponsor must take the 'visionary' and political leadership positions for the project to have any chance of success.

Ethics, personal responsibilities

Extending the debate - what if the project manager has been given clear direction by the business policy maker, but suspects (with good evidence from experience) that the project he or she is being directed to run is unlikely to be successful and may result in outcomes which the community of 'users' are likely to reject and possibly even oppose? What leadership role and what responsibility, does the project manager now have?

On complex projects, project managers are inevitably faced with conflicts of interest. The most important personal attributes for successful project managers relate to having the integrity (and in some cases bravery) to expose these concerns and the tenacity to engage as vigorously as required, with all stakeholders, to seek out the best possible solutions. Managing conflict, in the sense of identifying and finding negotiated solutions to often complex competing stakeholder agendas is part of the day-job for project managers involved in politically sensitive projects.

Balancing competing agendas

As the taxi driver, the project managers' responsibility is to deliver the client to the destination, keeping within the laws, using safe practices and conforming to the accepted standards. They might not agree with the destination, but they do have a professional responsibility to expose (and when necessary to manage the risks) and seek out the best possible route. That may mean being tough and direct with stakeholders, including the client. However, in the end, once all challenges are considered, they either deliver the client to the destination or get out of the cab.

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