5 Ways to Lead Projects More Effectively

Project management training, advice and wise counsel can be found anywhere. Fair less is written about leading projects. This short article won't put much of a dent in the balance of that writing — project management vs. project leadership, but it will illuminate five key lessons that I have learned from personal experience, as well as coaching and observing others.

What I share here will help with projects of any size, but they will likely feel the most real and matter the most as the project size and scope grows. For that purpose, I am writing them in the context of bigger projects, but lessons are valid regardless of how big the budget and how long the timeline is for the work ahead of you.

These lessons can help your projects be more effective, achieve better results and allow you to perhaps get a bit more sleep at night. Sleep — that should be reason enough to read on.

Keep the Big Picture Perspective

Why is the organization embarking on this project? Do you know the answer to this with crystal clarity? And do those involved in the project's implementation know it as well?

If your answer is as firm as the jello in your grandmother's refrigerator, you have a problem. If you don't know the purpose and value of the project, you can't lead it successfully. If your team doesn't know with equal clarity, their focus with waver and their energy will drop.

You not only must know purpose of the project, but how it will make a difference to your Customers and team. As a leader, you must have this clear perspective. Without that picture, it will be hard for you to lead the team as challenges, obstacles and diversions arrive.

Keep the big picture in your mind at all times. If you don't have that picture, it is time to go get it.

Beware the 50% Fallacy

Often times, in an effort to put the right people with the right skills and background on the project team, people are assigned to a team at 50% of their time. (I've seen everything from 90% to 5% listed on project documentation.)

This doesn't work.

Well, let me tell you what it does do (and therefore why it doesn't really work).

Most people when attached to a project at a portion of their time are not really released from their regular job. Or if they are, no one talks to them about clear expectations on what they aren't supposed to do in their current role while they work on the project. This leads to one of two outcomes:

1. People trying to do all of both jobs (and either getting burned out, stressed out, sick or doing neither very well).
2. People so confused that they can't focus well enough to do either job well.

Partial assignments can work but only if two things exist: the expectations of the person, the project manager and their regular supervisor are all mutual and specific, and the partial assignments are very short term in nature.

Especially on big projects, I seldom see either of these things being the case.

As a leader, recognize that it is better to have a smaller team completely focused on the project — and work hard to create teams in this way.

Understand the Pressures and Challenges of Scope Creep

Scope creep will happen. Once you are into the project, little things will be learned and everyone will want to add them into the project. Taken as individual decisions, each one might make sense. Taken in total, they can completely derail a project.

As the leader, you must lead the team through these decisions.

How do you do it?

1. Recognize that the pressures to add to the project are normal and understandable. No one is "wrong" for suggesting them.
2. Take each on its own merits, gaining insight as broadly as possible before adding to the scope or not.
3. Make all the decisions and have all of the conversation about those decisions based on the big picture purpose of your project. It all starts there.

You Have Tools, Use Them

Leading a project, in the end, is leading. So use what you already know (and learn here each month) as the toolkit for leading a project. If you have project management training, of course you should use those tools too — they are valuable and helpful. If you don't have the skills and tools you need, definitely go get them. They will allow you to navigate the challenges of the project's journey.

The bottom line is you have a lot of tools, from Gantt charts to giving better feedback; from creating scoping documents to facilitating meetings.

Use all those skills — management and leadership.

Change Your Title, or at Least Your Actions

Your title might be project manager. Fine, wear it proudly. But remember too that you have a project to lead, not just manage. When you remember that, you will look at the work a little differently. And that difference may make all the difference in your results (and maintain your sanity).