

## **Understanding the Importance of Soft Skills within Projects**

**By Mario Landa, PMP and Alejandro Acevedo, PMP**

When we are part of a project we realize that we need to deal with very diverse situations in which our technical abilities are very important, nevertheless we also become aware that we must understand the needs of everyone involved. For example, very often we hear phrases such as: “The project failed, because it was off track”, “the project team did not work as hard and as good as it was expected” or even that “the sponsor did not provide the required support”. What these phrases might be indicating is a general lack of leadership, this shortcoming can be denoted by one or some of the stakeholders involved in the project, and finally results in a project that does not satisfy the needs of the client or of the performing organization.

It is a matter of fact that all necessary human abilities change regarding the role we play within this temporary effort that we call “project.” Leadership is an ability that is expected to be developed and employed by some of the project stakeholders; other roles like the sponsor, team leader and even team members, also require of these abilities. We might question the need for the team members to have these abilities because we tend to focus more on technical abilities, but the truth is that human relations can make our jobs easier, for example in the moment we negotiate with our leaders or other collaborators, or when we request some materials to finish our activities.

The wrongful use of leadership by the project manager has the following consequence: insurmountable functional barriers, this particular situation presents itself with more frequency in large organizations with projects that involve different areas and/or locations, although a smaller organization is no stranger to this type of situation. A considerable damage to the relationship with others can also exist when one of the parties involved has a different point of view regarding the project’s components, and an agreement cannot be reached upon the criteria to be used during its life cycle. Furthermore, it is possible that some or various team members may have poor performance, due to the fact that their attitude is not aligned with the project’s responsibilities and therefore they are not committed to carry them through with the expected standards. All the previously stated, can have as a result the damage of the project leader’s image, if he/she falls into a state that will allow all other stakeholders to stop considering his/her authority or stop taking into account his/her level of influence within the organization, putting at risk the successful completion of the project and generating the opportunity of being shut out of future endeavors.

While the lack of leadership of a sponsor can negatively affect the project, in ways related to the lack of desired support; likewise, a team leader that does not effectively guide all of its collaborators, probably will face long hours before the project deadline and will have to endure several complaints after the project is delivered. It might be a good thing for us to anticipate this type of situation and respond just as soon as we perceive the first red flags related to a considerable deficiency in leadership.

It is the project manager’s responsibility to recognize that the previously mentioned conditions are occurring, which makes an impending need for us to identify the presence of adverse behavior or behavior other than expected. It is very important to know which behaviors are to be expected, in order to compare those against what is being observed. Without a clear definition we cannot start talking about a problem. To establish the desired behavior, we need to develop a human resources

management plan for each project in which all hierarchical relationships among stakeholders are identified. Once we cannot deny the presence of such variations, it is recommended, to take the most appropriate corrective action, to examine it within a very systematic and analytic approach in order to find the main root cause. After we have confirmed that the absence or deficiency in leadership is what has caused the failure, the project manager must face it with a rational approach, just like the one described below:

1. Conflicts must be faced with intelligence, and if what we are to consider is human behavior, this means that we are talking about *Emotional Intelligence*, a popular term coined by Daniel Goleman in the last decade of the twentieth century. Emotional Intelligence refers to the ability to recognize our own feelings as well as those of others. The project manager must always consider the following statements: 1) The project's objectives are achieved through people's work and 2) To work with people is to work with feelings. Hence it is important to take into account both persons as well as emotions, without forgetting, that the project manager is also a person. Therefore, he/she shares those characteristics so the project manager is susceptible to exacerbate the situation and therefore can also affect the project environment.
2. Likewise, as we take care of these aspects, the appropriate *motivation* is another feature to consider. On one side, an unmotivated peer will certainly diminish the effort he/she puts into the task and therefore could spread that lack of motivation to the rest of the team members. On the other hand, what happens if it is the sponsor who seems to be unmotivated regarding the project? If the project manager observes that the sponsor is losing interest in the project he/she is promoting, it is recommended to influence him/her and everyone else who might require it, to pursue the fulfillment of the originally established objectives, and to remind them of the benefits that the successful conclusion of the project will bring. PMI® recommends the usage of a stakeholder's management plan to establish the interest and requirements of everyone involved. We must also identify the context of the project with regards to other projects that are also being sponsored by the same person, understanding that the project at hand has a determined priority within the sponsor's portfolio. Therefore, this does not mean that the project is not important. All team members must be convinced that they are part of a "team" and hence the failure of any of them might result in the failure of the whole team.

Evidently the perfect scenario would be the one in which these negative effects due to poor leadership will never arise. It is always preferable to have a proactive style that minimizes the possibility of these deviations to take place, than a reactive style that applies corrective actions to events that have already happened even though the methods might reflect the enormous experience and capability to solve conflicts by the project manager. To promote that all stakeholders are collaborating favorably, it is not enough to have a clear understanding of what leadership means, it is also important to recognize that leadership will have to be in accordance to the circumstances. For example, it is not recommended to determine that there will always be a dictatorial attitude instead of a conciliatory one. It is of the utmost importance to understand that the project manager must enforce the so called *situational leadership*, taken from the model developed by Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hersey. This model balances between several types of behaviors enforced by the leader according to the level of development of the project team, just as we explain ahead.

In situations where someone involved in the project begins to manifest behaviors that show discomfort, an *assertive and empathic communication* style should be applied, as a way to express ideas supported by the respect and recognition of everyone else, as well as the consideration and comprehension of their feelings, with the goal to reach all objectives, whether they are project objectives or personal objectives. A very clear example is the high ranking executive who addresses his collaborators in a rude and humiliating manner, obtaining immediately from them a reaction that is not always the most desired one. This attitude from the executive generates discontent and resentment in all team members. On the other hand we have the high ranking executive who takes the time to learn his/her team's concerns and ideas and who is able to reflect genuine interest in the exchange of ideas establishing a trustworthy relationship that generates stability within the team.

From all of this, we can manifest that all stakeholders in a project team need to exercise some kind of leadership throughout the project life cycle. Poor leadership brings with it problems that can be settled or avoided by relying on technical abilities and management abilities that are defined by processes, techniques and tools within human resources and communications plans, among others. Another factor of high relevance for the successful completion of all projects is the usage of soft skills. When they are cultivated and developed all relations are improved among stakeholders and therefore the success probability is increased from the client's point of view as well as the project team.

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