

Untangling the 7 Threads of Project Leadership

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In our work with many organisations in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors over the last 20 years, we have been continually looking out for the tactics, strategies and thinking that are best suited to each of our clients' organisational projects. Fashions and ideas come and go, but what we believe hasn't changed enough is the focus on project 'management' rather than 'leadership'. In spite of slight shifts towards the 'people' elements of projects and programmes, there is still a heavy emphasis on processes, technology and operational measurement. Companies invest millions in data management and tracking tools and introduce processes on top of more processes. However they balk at the cost of a few days of leadership team or project team development that could lead to better use of those tools, unravelling those processes, and inspiring those teams to become up to 40 times more productive. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). There is no doubt about it, many projects, processes and relationships are in a bit of a tangle!

We are all tired of hearing that '70% of projects are still failing to deliver' (Kotter, 2014) and feel that sinking feeling when yet another project disaster hits the headlines. Poor leadership and communication are blamed yet again. How do these messages impact on us? Fear, defensiveness, protectiveness, avoidance ... and they encourage the inward-looking, rationalising loop which creates stuck thinking. What we need is the 'double loop' thinking (Argyris, 2004), (Argyris and Schön, 1978). This involves us in stepping back and reflecting on our experiences: 'plan-do-check-act' rather than 'do-do-do-do'. (Deming, 1993) This kind of thinking generates positive, open, creative team and organisational learning.



We need to move away from the tendency to get stuck in the detail, diving in, reacting to the challenges we encounter, just following the direction given to us. We need to combine and hone our intellectual input, our emotional intelligence, and our managerial competence: our IQ, EQ and MQ (Dulewicz and Higgs, 1998; 2000). Put simply, we need to think, feel *and* do!

We have been working with our clients and examining our own practice to discover what project leaders can do, practically, in their real-world organisational environment, at their level in the hierarchy, to improve their own success rate. We have identified 7 threads of project leadership activity that anyone can use, in any role, at any point in the life of a project, whether that be an external, client-facing project or an internal business change.

Why 'threads'? Because from our personal experience of leading projects and programmes, we feel the notion of steps or stages, where one finishes and another starts, interferes with effective 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), or optimal group and individual working. They get in the way of using cycles of agile, iterative and innovative improvements. These threads are practical to apply, and based on considerable depth and breadth of research and experience. We have seen change-weary project communities being re-energised when they try out these threads on-the-job and experience that 'touchpoint' moment (Hawkins, 2014) where others are inspired to follow, or indeed to pick up the baton and lead. The following is our current summary of those threads and suggestions for action. We welcome your thoughts.

Thread 1 – Spotting and validating needs and opportunities

This first thread of activity involves observing and evaluating what is happening now with an open mind, and showing others how to spot and avoid ‘habit blindness’ and group think. All projects, product development or change initiatives begin with someone being curious, properly listening to the stories out there: the coffee machine chats, not just filtered information that reaches the board room, imagining the future, stepping back and noticing where different parts of the organisational system need work, either inside the organisation, with customers or competitors. That same careful observation, listening, creativity and ideas generation needs to be sustained throughout, often combining gut feel with hard facts.

Suggestions: Passionate about an idea? Get a ‘reality check’ with others. If you are unsure, get more information, from close colleagues, then from people with different perspectives, including people you may see as ‘part of the problem’, and listen to the multiple perspectives on costs/benefits/risks/timing ..., don’t just defend your ideas.

Make time to keep talking through: Is this still working? Are we ‘head-down-delivering’ or adapting to our environment? What else could we do? Could we save our organisation/team’s precious resources, effort and time by stopping, refocusing or re-prioritising any part of our work?

Thread 2 – Making the pitch

This thread involves presenting ideas and making them sound clear, practical and compelling, to influence/get the support of a wide variety of audiences. An idea is pitched to senior management or shareholders to get funding and approval. A project is pitched to new team members, partners, customers and suppliers, all with different opinions, needs, motivations and levels of understanding. Organisational changes triggered by the project are pitched to the people not actively involved but personally affected, through changes to their roles, relationships, processes or even job security.

Suggestions: Ensure all your written and spoken pitches are in your audience’s language, to have the right emotional resonance and credibility. You will need to know your audience well. Real conversations and on-going dialogue are needed, with groups and with individuals, not just a list of ‘communications’ to send out at specified times.

You may need to repeat information many times. People are busy, miss meetings and emails, or just don’t have your level of technical knowledge and experience. You will need to explain changes, progress and decisions made, in your audiences’ language, to manage expectations and perceptions.

Next time you prepare an important message, stand in your audience’s shoes. Think what’s in it for them? How will your message land? What do you want them to think, feel and do? What jargon and technical elements do/don’t they need to understand? You may need to ‘reframe’ – show people a different angle they hadn’t thought of which answers their questions or reduces concerns. A few extra minutes planning a message can significantly increase engagement and collaboration, reduce delays and improve decision making.

Thread 3 – Getting the show on the road

This is the thread for thinking ahead, anticipating, practical planning and aligning activities ENOUGH. Not 'in at the deep end' and not 'analysis paralysis', the sweet spot in between, which needs time (more than it is usually given) and multiple inputs. "Never plan alone" is our project leadership motto, at all stages.

Suggestions: Create a culture of keeping one step ahead right from the start. Make all your planning activities creative and engaging – for example, a well-planned Kick-off workshop, including high energy brainstorming and knowledge exchange activities. Involve others (Confucius, 551-479 BC) with diverse specialist knowledge to open up 'black boxes', increase transparency and share enough knowledge. This builds respect and trust, improves estimating, sequencing, highlights interdependencies, helps with workload management and makes the road ahead clear to all.

Find out who needs what information on progress, why, when, in what format so you can manage expectations and agree who will be consulted or informed over changes. Ensure everyone knows the checkpoints that will show progress and if there is something that can't *not* be done, then just do it (being sure to tell/involve the necessary people!).

Put a simple graphical image of your plan (1 A4 page in a font size you can read) on a real or virtual whiteboard so all can see, and a dashboard to highlight main achievements, risks and opportunities, goals and deliverables. And highlight the updates together, so it is a living, evolving picture of the project that is 'owned' by everyone.

Thread 4 – Building the team

For this thread we focus on creating and sustaining a bond between people who may not have worked together before, who come from different backgrounds, functions, levels in the hierarchy, even different commercial entities. Disconnected and dysfunctional teams are an enormous drain on organisational resources, the team's reputation and therefore its ability to influence. It leads to, among other things, poor decision making, duplication of effort and unproductive conflict. The good news is that carefully chosen words and well timed actions from the project leader can create the foundations of a high-performing team and show the team how to sustain this team culture.

Suggestions: Building relationships of trust and respect and sustaining the team's energy (Bruch and Vogel, 2011) requires, focused effort. It doesn't happen by itself. Especially when working remotely, a simple word or action misunderstood and not clarified at the early stages of a project can be the thin end of the wedge that creates 'us and them'. If you notice this happening, act quickly. If the team meets or talks regularly, the stakes of raising issues aren't too high.

Explicitly make successful and enjoyable team and cross-team working the common goal AND everyone's responsibility. Peter Hawkins' '5 disciplines of high-performing teams' (2014) is a practical springboard for discussion. If this direct approach to discussing team relationships and team dynamics is culturally a stretch for some members of your team, approach the conversations sensitively. Show the team the evidence and benefits achieved. Add an item to your team meeting agenda: 'What's working well (evidence) and what needs work in our team working?' Demonstrate constructive discussion. Discuss sensitive issues 1:1.

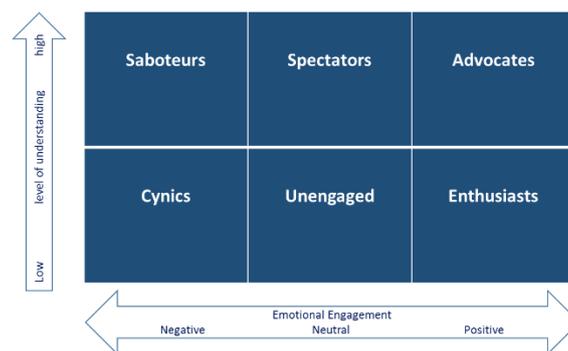
Thread 5 – Getting engaged across the organisation

This is where we monitor and support the wider impact of our project or change initiative on the complex organisation or environment around it. We need to navigate the politics, look for ways to mitigate or reduce disruption and spot and work through resistance to change, rather than being too internally and technically focused.

Even small changes to the organisation's processes need to be done *with* our colleagues and customers, not *to* them. It is a myth that everyone resists change. What people don't like is the unknown, the ambiguous, the arrogant or aggressive. No-one is obliged to collaborate so we need to understand what would make them want to, (Goffee and Jones, 2006), which means understanding and the strongest human motivators at work: 1) enjoying a sense of safety and belonging, 2) seeing we are making an effective contribution and 3) feeling appreciated/recognised.

Suggestions: Find ways to involve people in ways that genuinely meet these universal needs. You can't reach everyone so build a strong network of local, reliable advocates. They need to know each specialist community affected by the project, be willing and able to involve them and give support.

Are your stakeholder needs being met? Could they help you succeed if you worked more closely with them? Consider who could act as advocates and get them on board. Create a 'stakeholder relationship map' to better understand who you need to engage with, and work out a plan to build and optimise those relationships.



Thread 6 – Making it happen

This thread focuses on action, personal resilience and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1999): what we and others think, feel and do as the project progresses. Skilful use of different leadership styles and roles in different situations is key (Dulewicz & Higgs 2003): when to push for action and when to open up the debate; when to set the pace yourself and when to coach others to lead; when to focus on the task or relationships to get the job done.

Suggestions: We need to look after ourselves, manage stress levels and workload, as well as being there for others. Authentic leadership (Goffee and Jones, 2006) is all about making sure we are able to be 'mindful' or present in the moment. We need to understand what is reasonable pressure – which can be very energising and bring out the best in us and our teams - and what is actually overload.

Under stress we can get tunnel vision which affects our judgement, relationships and decision making, even our health. Keep taking the pulse: yours, the teams' and the organisation around you.

Take a step back and make sure you are leading your projects or initiatives and they aren't driving you. We are all human, so ask for help if you need it. A good tip is to notice how you are feeling physically. Are you noticing any tension, such as a tight knot in your stomach or chest, fidgety hands, clenched teeth or jaw, a sensation of head spinning or an overall sense of tiredness over and above the work itself? This will be very visible to others if it isn't to you. Just a single minute to stop-breathe-think can significantly clear your head, improve your performance and your impact others. (Lewis and Webster, 2014)

Thread 7 –Reviewing, learning, celebrating

This is the thread of actively promoting and seeking opportunities to learn. Forget the 'tools' for a moment, this is a purely human experience. It is also not just the 'lessons learned' session and bullet points captured at the end. It is the way the team thinks about the project all the way through and their relationships. Are other people a collection of 'stakeholders' to be 'satisfied' or 'persuaded'? Or are they trusted colleagues and partners regularly included in discussions, with enough trust to allow a degree of informed and shared risk taking without blame?

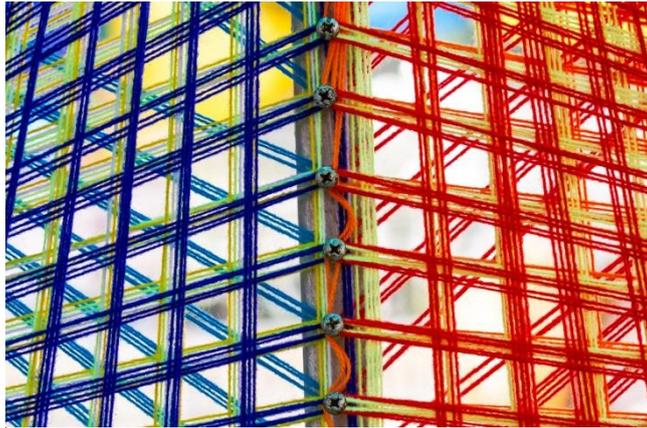
Suggestions: Explicitly set the team culture as being open to learning and make it safe for people to try new things. That means thinking about the language you use. Literally saying 'try this' rather than 'do this', gives people space to experiment. Try informal on-the-job coaching, for individuals or teams, constructive team reviews and knowledge sharing at meetings. Make on-going feedback on the job the norm, e.g. making sure activities are properly finished and to the necessary standard.

Talk to people affected by the project and take time to ensure each new tool or process or change is embedded in day-to-day practice and has actually been an improvement for the people involved. Talk to them directly, don't just send out a survey, because you will learn much more. Innovation is fuelled by continual iterative cycles of improvement, developing the practice stories, building on the successes and lessons of the previous cycles of activity.

Regularly recognise effort and successes. Otherwise, people will always focus on the next problem. Summarise those achievements for your different audiences in language that will engage and inspire them, to earn yourself and the team credibility and consolidate your relationships.

Consider how often you have reviews, what they feel like and what they deliver. Don't accept, long, dull and unproductive meetings. Make them short, inspiring and productive!

Also think about who you involve, how you prepare, how much care you take when you document or present information about progress, problems handled, issues resolved and opportunities seized. This should be a 'documentary' – informative, memorable and interesting - not 'documentation'. It is your legacy and track record of adding value to the business, and yet another opportunity for leading and influencing perceptions and thinking.



About the Authors

This Project Leadership Framework has been developed by Philippa Hale and Jean Gamester.

They are senior consultants at Open Limits and on the Associate Faculty at Henley Business School.

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They work with organisations including Harrods, FT, British Transport Police and many regional police and local government departments, Hearst UK, Condé Nast, Orient Express (now Belmond), BG Group, NHS Trusts, HR Wallingford, Pincent Mason, Punter Southall, Royal London Asset Management, Which?, The Storytellers and CIPD.

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They help organisations weave the threads of service leadership, team skills and continuous improvement into their day-to-day delivery. Through team workshops, coaching, business simulations, training and action learning, they help teams and leaders make change happen.

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