

## **Telling the Truth about Project Leadership (Chapter 2)**

By Ed Oakley

A regional claim center of a major insurance company was in big trouble. It's customer service rating was a miserable 58%, entirely unacceptable. A senior manager was brought in to lead a critical turnaround project.

After experiencing an Enlightened Leadership workshop, the approach he took was very simple, so simple that he attracted lots of naysayers, lots of pushback from all directions within the organization. Eighteen months later, his simple approach to project leadership had taken their customer service rating all the way to 93%. That regional claim center became the customer service benchmark for the rest of the company.

How did he do it? Stay tuned.

How well a manager provides project leadership will determine whether the people factor is a divider or multiplier of project team performance. If the leader is effective in dealing with the soft, people issues, the performance of the project team is multiplied. If not, the people factor is divided, and project performance nosedives.

The key to successful project leadership--and successful projects--is to bring out the best in people. Unleash their potential and focus the resulting energy, creativity, spirit, buy-in, passion, talent, enthusiasm, etc. on accomplishing our project objectives. It is not an exaggeration to say that project leadership is mission critical! With so much riding on the skills of the project leader, it's not surprising that innumerable complex leadership theories have made their way into the business world.

Leadership has gotten a reputation as a complex, mystical, ethereal, maybe even touchy-feely talent that we can't quite wrap our arms around or demonstrate routinely. Everyone knows it is important, but many might not know how to do it. Most managers have become experts in the hard parts of their jobs through training, education and practice. The same cannot be said for the soft parts of those jobs. In general, managers and executives don't have nearly the experience or the education to cultivate sound practices in dealing with the soft, people issues. So, the challenges of leadership can look more complex than they really are.

It's much more effective to simplify the way in which leadership issues are viewed and approached. Most of life's complex challenges are tackled by distilling them down to their simplest forms. Even cleaning out the garage is overwhelming (at least at our houses!) unless it's reduced to a series of simple tasks!

### **The power of simplicity**

Complex solutions are rarely executed successfully, except on television. A number of years ago there was a series of TV commercials that featured basketball greats Larry Bird and Michael Jordan having an amazing shoot out in which they each tried to trump the other's best shot. The dialogue that laid out the shot always went something like, "Off the

ceiling, around the pole, over the car, through the window, nothing but net.” The player would then nail the shot perfectly as described.

In real life, the margin of error in those shots is so infinitesimal that it would be impossible to succeed. The slightest miscalculation would mean a colossal air ball. Yet, project managers often choose complex solutions with long odds instead of effective, albeit simple, effective methods of leadership. Former General Electric CEO, Jack Welch, shed some light on the reason complexity is chosen over simplicity when, in an interview with *The Harvard Business Review*, he said, “*Insecure managers create complexity. ... Real leaders don’t need clutter. ... But it’s not easy. You can’t believe how hard it is for people to be simple, how much they fear being simple. They worry that if they’re simple, people will think they’re simple-minded. In reality, of course, it is just the opposite. Clear, tough-minded people are the most simple.*”

Like a trick shot, a complex solution is almost guaranteed to be difficult. A simple solution might not be easy, but at least it has a chance of succeeding. Experience suggests the simpler the better. PLMS focuses on providing not only effective, but also simple, project leadership tools. The success of these tools is founded in their simplicity. Complexity is best reserved for those competitions in which “degree of difficulty” has a weighted impact in judging who gets the gold medal!

While many aspects of project leadership can be very complex, there are always ways to simplify them. Successful executives are beginning to recognize the power of simplicity. John Sculley, former CEO of Apple Computer, said, “Everything we have learned in the industrial age has tended to create more and more complication. I think that more and more people are learning that you have to simplify, not complicate. Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

The authors have spent over two decades doing exactly that with a simple Framework for Project Leadership that has been honed into a successful tool for thousands of project managers in many of the top companies around the globe. This Framework will be useful for many project leadership applications, including:

- problem solving
- aligning team and stakeholders
- gaining buy-in for what needs to be done
- resolving conflict
- motivating team members
- enhancing communication
- getting commitment of all stakeholders
- clarifying scope and objectives
- negotiating
- holding inspiring project reviews
- unleashing creativity and innovation
- developing collaboration and teamwork

### **Ask, don't tell**

One of the key underlying concepts upon which the Framework for Project Leadership is built is the concept of asking, not telling people things. Roy Romer, the former governor of Colorado, brought his staff of ninety-five people into an auditorium to share some exciting news. With a grin on his face, he announced, "We are going to implement total quality management!" He then paused as he waited for the applause. And he waited, and he waited some more. Instead of applause, what he got was an instant drop in morale. What was the message that he had just inadvertently given to his staff? That they had a quality problem! Of course, he did not intend to put out that negative message, but that was the result.

Another familiar scenario never fails to rankle team members. A world-class expert breezes into the organization to solve a specific problem or challenge and delivers an outstanding plan. Despite all the money invested in creating an excellent plan that will produce results, the plan fails. Why? Because it is invariably dumped on the staff to implement along with the covert message that the staff has been doing it wrong and now they need to do it differently. There is likely to be very little commitment by a staff who had no voice in the creation of the solution. Worse, they may even sabotage the plan. Asking, instead of telling will produce much better results.

### **The Answer is in the Room**

With 22 other professional speakers, trainers and facilitators, author Ed Oakley was socializing with his colleagues as they all waited for an attorney to begin his presentation on intellectual property rights, a topic of great interest to the group. Ed kept noticing Bob Wendover, the host, as he kept going back and forth out of the room. Bob didn't seem very happy. So, Ed left the room, caught up with Bob and asked what he could do to help. Bob replied, "The speaker is 30 minutes late, and I cannot get in touch with him using any of the phone numbers I have for him. It appears that he is not going to show up! I don't know what to do," Bob exclaimed.

Ed had an idea and offered to run the meeting. With nothing to lose, Bob agreed. After a few preliminaries, Ed addressed the group. "I have a belief that the 'answer is in the room.' I would like to suggest we test this belief," he said. Ed then asked the attendees to write down any questions about intellectual property rights that they had. Everyone did that and passed the papers to Ed. He read the first question and asked, "Who has the answer to this question?" Three people raised their hands and they addressed the question. Ed then went to the next question, again asking who had the answer. Several different people responded. This process continued for one hour and fifteen minutes until all but one question about intellectual property rights had been answered. The room was buzzing with energy!

The meeting was a phenomenal success and the expert wasn't even there. What would the energy have been like if the attorney had spoken for an hour about his agenda? Snooze... It's also unlikely that he would have been willing to give specific answers to detailed questions. That level of detail is usually reserved for a consultation fee! To the great benefit and surprise of the attendees, the answers were in the room.

A good project leader recognizes that she doesn't have, nor need to have, the answers for all the challenges encountered by the project team. She is willing to let go of her ego-driven desire to have all the answers, instead recognizing that what is needed is the best answer. She appreciates that the purpose of assembling a team is to bring together the diverse talents of a number of people in a way that synergistically harnesses the knowledge, creativity, diverse experience, ideas, etc. to create results that are greater than the sum of the individual abilities. The team itself has the answers, even when they are not immediately apparent. The key is getting to those answers. That is done by asking the right questions.

### **Asking the Right Questions**

Eli Goldratt, author of several popular business novels, including *The Goal*, said, "If we want people to take action, we must refrain from giving them the answers." In other words, we must give them the questions, not the answers. *The Goal* is a business novel about a consultant who was brought in to solve major, complex problems in a manufacturing environment. To the frustration of his client, the consultant would not provide them the solutions, but instead asked them effective questions. In the end, their own ideas solved the problem, thus they were fully committed to make it work.

A key aspect of project leadership is simply the ability to facilitate answers from the team. It comes down to asking the right questions, or what we call "Effective Questions." Six of these questions make up the Framework for Project Leadership. This Framework provides guidance for dealing with the majority of project leadership challenges. The other two questions are very important in certain situations. Likewise, depending on the specific challenge, not all of the Framework questions are needed for every situation. Since these eight questions are pivotal to simplifying project leadership, each will be explored in depth in subsequent chapters. This will provide the groundwork for how to use the highly successful and potent Framework for Project Leadership.

Got questions? We do! Believe it or not, these questions are the answer!

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**For additional information, products or service, please contact us:**

**Enlightened Leadership Solutions, Inc.**

**Phone: (303)729-0540 Fax: (303) 689-7666**

[ContactUs@enleadership.com](mailto:ContactUs@enleadership.com)

[www.leadershipmadesimple.com](http://www.leadershipmadesimple.com)

[www.enleadership.com](http://www.enleadership.com)

[www.makingmanagersintoleaders.com](http://www.makingmanagersintoleaders.com)