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# How to Develop the Leaders you Need for your Large, Complex Project

*Throughout the industry, talents are lacking for leading Large, Complex Projects, even more so as a generation of project leaders is retiring. Developing the leaders you need for the upcoming wave of Large, Complex Projects is a necessity. And at the same time we need to give them a structured education to increase the success probability of those projects. How can we develop these talents? What education do they really need? Is your current project manager development program adequate?*

## The industry context requires new talent for project leadership

A generation of seasoned and proven project leaders for large, complex projects is retiring. A significant generation gap is now apparent. In this context, most project organizations dealing with large, complex projects realize that poaching talents has only limited effectiveness, as the overall available talent pool is shrinking. As the average size and complexity of projects increases throughout the industry, organizations have less capability to take on a significant project failure. And project stakeholders expect more consistently successful performance than before.

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Growing voluntarily a new generation of effective project leadership talent is unavoidable and the most advanced project-oriented organizations have started creating specific development programs. There is no guidance or experience there as the previous generation of project leaders learnt their trade in the school of hard knocks through success and failure – not through a dedicated education program. We find that in many instances those programs that are implemented today have only limited effectiveness. What then should be the contents of such a program to give these professionals the best chances to be successful project leaders?

## What the classical project management development programs look like, and why they are not effective

Most project management development programs setup by project organizations look towards the off-the-shelf available project management standards, and they often take the Project Management Institute (PMI)'s PM-BOK (Project Management Body of Knowledge) as a reference. They often get the would-be project managers PMP (Project Management Professional) certified or equivalent. And… they stop there (apart maybe from some conventional trainings on the particular processes of the organization).

This is clearly not sufficient in particular when it comes to large, complex projects. While quite comprehensive in the treatment of the different processes that need to be addressed in the context of project management, and useful to get a good understanding of the different issues to be tackled by a project manager, the PM-BOK approach actually addresses relatively simple, linear projects. It takes a process-oriented approach that does not account for the surprises and discontinuities generated by complexity. The PM-BOK approach remains a sound basic project management approach that needs increasingly to be supplemented by a specific layer. Even in the IT world, while the PMP certification is a must, a number of additional methods (Agile, ITIL etc) have been developed to account for the particularities of the industry.

At the same time, the process-based approach does not address the issue of leadership and emotional intelligence of the upcoming project leader. The more a project is complex (in the sense of involving many contributors with very different objectives), the more those skills are decisive for the success of the project.

## Successful project leaders' development programs must involve Education first - and Training second

Although it is the most challenging to acquire, we are firm believers that it is first important to develop the soft skills, self-awareness and in general, the mindset of the upcoming project leaders (as it is the key to facing successfully the inevitable issues of project execution). On the other hand, process-related knowledge or even technical-related knowledge is relatively easy to learn, in particular by people that have the right mindset, discipline, humility and self-esteem. This explains why successful project leaders often remain successful even when they change industry.

Instead of just covering process-related knowledge, project leaders' development programs should thus first focus on personal development and add some deep insights about complex projects and systems. They should be holistic educational programs and not just a couple of trainings (Education focuses on building the mind; and training focuses on building skills. Here lies all the difference).

## The key building blocks of a successful project leadership talent development program

We thus recommend that project leadership development programs include as a minimum:

- Self-awareness building (e.g. through project leadership 360 degrees surveys, and other types of self-awareness surveys, and knowledge on mind patterns and how our perception is

filtered), accompanied by an action-based strength improvement program,

- Emotional Intelligence development (including active listening, empathy management, quick connection, networking),
- Facilitating and coaching skills and tools knowledge,
- Communication skills (public presentation, media communication, influencing),
- Process insights and understanding (Theory of Constraints, Complexity theory, dependent events),
- Leadership understanding and personal leadership development, e.g. in the context of Project Soft Power™,
- Conventional project management models (PM-BOK type),
- Business and entrepreneur acumen,
- Support in new function through personalized coaching.

Nowadays, large, complex projects offer the possibility to be exposed to commercial issues and leadership experiences as a 'package manager' – in charge of a specific scope package within the entire project, covering in a transverse manner all disciplines from engineering to delivery. This allows the future project leader to hone his skills in a somewhat protected environment, under the mentoring of a seasoned project leader.

In any case, for the transformation into a successful project leader, the famous sentence coined by Marshall Goldsmith is more than ever applicable: "*What got you here won't get you there*". What made an individual successful so far is not necessarily what will make him/her successful as a project leader. Organizations need to go beyond apparent success and check out the individual's character.

## How can we identify those upcoming potential project leaders in organizations?

One of the most difficult issues is to identify the talents in the organization that are the best suited for the position of Project Leader on a Large, Complex Projects. There is often no defined path to become a project leader although in most organizations, technical knowledge and competency is often the preferred initial trajectory. The qualities that are to be sought are demonstrable behaviors in the face of common project situations:

- Sense of initiative when facing unexpected events or fuzzy situations
- Sound decisiveness (evidence-based but without analysis paralysis)
- Obvious leadership capabilities in a group and demonstrated influencing capabilities across the organization

- Excellent communication and writing skills (including excellent listening skills)
- Multi-disciplinary interest and experience, as demonstrated by a career involving a diversity of positions

All these factors relate more to the character of the person than to the project experience or the technical knowledge of the particular area. It is because behavioural factors are obviously much more important in determining the potential of candidates.

## Complement the formal development program with coaching when taking up a project leadership role

Coaching is probably the most effective way to conduct self-development directly the heat of action. It is quite an investment because it is a personal, one-to-one relationship and it comes in different forms, but it always is action-focused and works on the behavioural issues of the coachee.

Coaching of people who step up in project leadership roles on large projects is an excellent option to ensure they get into the right project leader mindset (in particular when they have been promoted from strong departments or more technical backgrounds). All our coaching interventions in this context have been very successful in accelerating the learning curve of fresh project leaders and avoiding the basic mistakes that can be expected from a newcomer.

## Conclusion: developing your future Leaders for Large, Complex projects is an urgent issue to be taken seriously and that requires more education than training

Developing your future project leaders for large, complex projects is not easy. It does not take just one week of training here and there. It needs to be a comprehensive, long term approach focused on developing the person's character and behaviour in facing those types of unexpected events that are part and parcel of project leadership.

Those organizations that will build structured Project Leadership development program on the long term are those that will possess a definite competitive advantage in the future of Large, Complex Projects execution. Start today to implement such a comprehensive program as it is the key to ongoing success for your organization.

*Project Value Delivery is delivering development courses aimed specifically at upcoming project personnel. Our Project Soft Power™ approach, our experience in coaching project personnel and our unique High Potential Development program can help your organization grow your future project leaders. Contact us for more information.*
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