

## Research Update

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### **Investigating the Human Side of Project Management**

Zvi Aronson, Thomas Lechler and Peter Dominick

As anyone who has done it can attest, project management is complex work. It requires technical expertise, excellent analytical and coordination abilities and strong interpersonal and leadership skills. Traditionally however, efforts to understand the role of the project manager have emphasized those aspects of the job that deal with coordination and control. These aspects are critical, but with project-based work taking on greater strategic significance in most organizations, they are only part of the story. As we begin the twenty-first century the project manager's role has evolved in a way that places greater emphasis on a person's ability to lead strategically. Our research efforts focus on helping to better understand a project manager's leadership role and what its implications are for team dynamics and performance. The next few paragraphs highlight some the areas we are investigating and describe some implications for this work.

### **Project Spirit**

This strategic leadership role includes defining strategies for controlling project decisions and focus, but it also includes conveying a clear vision for project outcomes and generating enthusiasm and commitment amongst team members. The excitement, enthusiasm and commitment generated is analogous to the concept of "project spirit" which Tishler, Dvir and Shenhar (1996) hypothesized would be an important determinant of successful project outcomes.

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## Wesley J. Howe School Research Update (continued)

Previously two members of our team, Zvi Aronson and Thomas Lechler, began investigations of the effect of project spirit (operationally defined as a multi-faceted variable derived from organizational culture, job satisfaction, commitment and citizenship behaviors). This work is ongoing, but the results so far suggest that project spirit is important. Using data derived from over 118 project managers and their team members from organizations located in New York and New Jersey, the researchers have found spirit to be a strong predictor of project success ( $R^2 = .3$ ).

### The Leadership Factor

We believe one key to promoting spirit is a project manager's leadership style. Specifically, we are exploring differences between transactional and transformational approaches to project leadership and their implications for successful project outcomes. In general, transactional leadership behaviors focus on coping with complexity. As a result, transactional leadership helps to establish order and provide consistency (Kotter, 1990). Their focus is on process, (e.g. *how* decisions are made rather than *what* decisions are made). In contrast, transformational leadership behaviors are about coping with, even inspiring change (Kotter, 1990). In a manner consistent with what many recognize as being characteristic of today's more successful project managers, transformational leaders broaden and elevate follower's goals, providing them with confidence to go beyond minimally acceptable expectations. In comparison to other leadership styles (e.g. transactional leadership), transformational leaders provide more favorable motivational effects on group performance in a variety of settings.

### Project Leadership in a Dynamic Context

By establishing and empirically validating a model of the relationships between two distinct project leadership styles, project spirit and project success, we think our investigations will help in extending the traditional project management approach.

However, there are also a myriad of contextual factors in which project manager must operate. Therefore, another important objective for our research is to identify how contextual factors (e.g. characteristics of the project team and project types, nature of tasks, cost parameters, scheduling parameters and performance parameters) moderate relationships between project leader style, project spirit and project success. For instance, one major challenge facing many project man-

agers is having to lead project teams that are rarely a constant unit. Instead, these teams are often dynamic and consist of temporary part time members. Furthermore, external partners may need to be integrated into the project team. In addition, in most project organizations project managers lack full authority over project team members, but they are still fully responsible for the project's execution.

Currently, there are few quantitative investigations of project management work behaviors. Moreover, none of these existing models incorporate the dynamic nature of project characteristics to offer a contingent perspective on leadership behaviors. Ultimately, we hope to provide a framework that will be instructive for practitioners and researchers alike. Practitioners especially should find the framework useful with regard to selecting, training and developing project managers. Our findings could be used to structure training on how and when to apply transformational leadership behaviors in a project environment. In terms of staffing and selection our findings might also be used to better match project managers with certain types of projects in order to maximize project success and or facilitate project leadership development.

Your thoughts and ideas on our areas of investigation are important. Let us know what your experiences have been with developing successful project leaders and building strong project teams. In addition, if you think your organization might like to participate in our research investigations please contact us.

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