Leadership Principles for Project Success

Thomas Juli
To my wife, Tina, and
my daughters, Rhea and Aiyana
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Preface

This book is about project success. It reveals a secret for project success: effective project leadership. It shows where pure project management falls short and why project leadership is the decisive factor for project success. It outlines five simple yet powerful leadership principles which, if applied systematically, can help you pave the path to project success. This book explains these principles and illustrates how you can use them to set up, manage, and align your projects for success. Last but not least, it shows you how to become an effective project leader.

In a nutshell, the five principles state that effective project leaders

1. Build vision
2. Nurture collaboration
3. Promote performance
4. Cultivate learning
5. Ensure results

They thus help secure project success.

These five principles are not based on a particular theory or management concept. A vast amount of literature exists on project management, leadership, project success, and related topics. This literature is important and valuable. Yet, I did not want to write a literature review of the various books on project leadership. Although that also may be a valuable exercise, it was not my intention. Instead, I wanted to write a practical book based on my own personal experience in project management. I wanted to share my insights about project success and my philosophy of project leadership and how it contributes to project success. I was not interested in building complex theoretical models of project leadership. My aim was to develop a guideline for project leadership that can be applied in any kind of project. Thus, the project examples I cite come from all kinds of environments, professional and nonprofessional. They show that the principles are universal and independent of the nature of a project. One third of the book is reserved for practical samples showing the leadership principles in action. In addition, the appendices contain
practical and easy-to-use templates and guidelines you can immediately apply in your projects.

I am not in the position to claim that I have worked, managed, or reviewed only successful projects. I have seen and experienced great projects in which everything seemed to work. And I have been exposed to death march projects: doomed for failure from the beginning, or things just did not go well, or the work atmosphere was lousy, or there was no team and instead people were fighting rather than working together. This is not to say that this is normal. Indeed, I claim that most projects can be successful if set up and run correctly. This book will show you how.

It starts with good, solid project management. This is the toolset of a project. As such, it can serve as an excellent vehicle, leveling the way to project success. It is not, however, sufficient. I have witnessed projects in which the project manager was highly skilled in his or her discipline and all tools and templates were based on best practices. And yet the project failed or at least did not go as well as expected. Final project deliveries were good but the road to this delivery was filled with the debris of long hours, low team morale, and dissatisfied customers.

For some time I, too, had thought that project management is the critical success factor of a project. Fortunately, I learned that there is much more to it. At the beginning of a project I managed earlier in my consulting career I gathered the complete project team. We discussed how to ensure project success from the very beginning. Then we talked about the hard facts, which in this case was the successful integration of a call center software. And we went beyond these hard factors. We talked about how we could delight the customer, how we could ensure high quality throughout the project, how we could learn from our mistakes during the project, how we could work smart and not hard, and how we could have fun as a team. We set out on the project journey on a high note; we wanted to set a new standard for project success.

Succeed we did. The project was delivered on time and in budget. From this perspective many people would call the project a success no matter what. Analyzing the success, we found that it was actually the “softer” objectives that helped us deliver the project successfully. Project success was more than the sum of deliverables. The path to the final delivery mattered a great deal. And it was about us as the team. We worked together, shared our expertise and experience, grew together, and had fun together. Alas, we were human and consequently we made mistakes along the way. What was different in this project was what we made out of our mistakes. We took them as learning opportunities. We wanted to deliver results and thus accepted mistakes as learning steps toward the ultimate delivery of the final product. It was a very rewarding experience. And it was insightful, for it revealed the five principles I am laying out in this book. We started out the project with a common vision, we nurtured collaboration, we performed as individual experts and as a team helping each other, we cultivated learning, embracing mistakes as learning and growth opportunities, and finally we delivered results. Project management was an important and valuable element in project success. However, it
was the vision, collaboration, performance, learning, and results that made the key difference. They were and they are the principles for project success. Our project success was not a one-time phenomenon or happening at the end of the project. It was ongoing; it was a growth process for the duration of the complete project and culminated in the final delivery: on time, in budget, at a very high quality, and, last but not least, delighting the customer.

Project success is like a journey to a final destination. We can compare it with an expedition or tour. Take the image here of a mountain guide showing the path to the summit of the mountain. You can see the path in front of the guide. The planned route is marked on a map and maybe you can see it in the distance. To get to the summit you need to be in a good physical shape and carry the right tools with you. Depending on how experienced you are, you may need the help of others to reach the summit or you may offer your assistance to other members of the expedition. If you have ever hiked a mountain you know that arriving at the summit is certainly the climax of your trip. But it is not the only thing that matters. The ascent to and descent from the summit are just as important. And just as joyful. Reaching the summit may be the driver of the mountain tour. If, however, this is the only thing you focus on, chances are that you will fail along the way and never reach the summit. Hiking through nature, you are exposed to the natural elements and must react to changing environments. You may have a plan that has proven to be reliable in the past. However, at times you may have to change your track. You may need to take a detour or decide to turn back to the base camp and try to reach the summit at a later time or maybe not at all. Good, experienced tour guides know this. They take on the responsibility for their whole group. They want the group to safely reach the summit and return to the base. It is not about the performance of individuals, who may be highly skilled and experienced mountaineers. The mission is to reach the top together and return home safely. This is why the picture I chose for the book cover includes a group of people rather than a single individual reaching the summit of a mountain. A mountain tour is, just like a project, a team effort.

It is misleading to define project success in static terms, focusing only on the final delivery. In the mountain tour example, reaching the summit would represent that final delivery. Project success is dynamic and covers the complete path from initiation to the final deliverable and project closure. Effective project leaders take this into account, just like the experienced mountain guide who plans the tour,
takes a group of people to the summit, returns them home safely, and is committed
to making the tour a joyful and safe experience.

Project leadership and the principles of effective leadership are not limited to
the role of the project manager or project leader. Indeed, you can apply the five
principles of effective leadership in any role you fill on a project, whether as the
official project sponsor, project manager, team member, external consultant, project
auditor, or any other project role. Applying the leadership principles outlined in this
book contributes to project success. Alas, by themselves they do not guarantee proj-
ect success. It takes more than a single individual to secure project success. It takes a
team. The question is how you can increase the chances that your project is moving
in the right direction. The five leadership principles serve as a guideline to project
success. It is up to you to apply them in your role and thus make a difference. It
is a question of leadership. I am claiming that you, too, can apply the leadership
principles, practice leadership in your role, and thus contribute to project success. It
may be difficult at times. But it is possible. Every journey, regardless of how long it
may be, starts with the first step. Take this step and move forward. May this book
serve as a companion on your journey to project success. I wish you a happy and
prosperous journey.
Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been a most rewarding and inspiring journey. It all started with some informal meetings with my colleague and coach, Christian Schmidkonz at SAP in the summer of 2007. Back then we were talking about our understanding of effective project management and leadership. One of the assignments Christian gave me was to list the ten most important principles of leadership. A week later we met again. I explained that I didn’t list ten but only came up with three principles: building vision, nurturing collaboration, and cultivating learning. The first principle of building vision has been my own mantra for quite some time. Back in spring of 2007, my wife and I had just passed on the leadership of a local preschool we founded in 2004. We wanted to build a reliable preschool for local children, ages one to three. Building and following this vision were more than a mantra. It helped us start and run the preschool for three consecutive years. It motivated all helping hands and it was still the motto of the preschool long after we passed on organizational responsibility to our successors.

Having come up with three leadership principles, I shared them with other peers. It was a beginning of a very interesting and insightful discussion that is still ongoing. I owe Christian Schmidkonz a great “Thank you!” for asking me what I thought was important in and for leadership. It was the beginning of my book project.

It wasn’t until a year later that I first considered writing a book on my experience in project management. About two months before the PMI Global Congress 2008 in Denver, Colorado, John Wyzalek, Senior Acquisitions Editor at Auerbach Publications, sent me an email. He had read the paper I planned to present in Denver, “Realigning Project Objectives and Stakeholders’ Expectations in a Project Behind Schedule” (July, 2008). Then he asked me if I had ever thought of turning this topic into a book. Indeed I had done so, but had never come to a point of actually pursuing this idea further. I thank John for this simple yet far-reaching question.

The PMI Global Congress in Denver was another important milestone in my book project for other reasons. There were two sessions that inspired me a great deal. They were Tom John’s presentation on “The Art of Project Management”...
Acknowledgements

and Complexity” (Johns, 2008) and Michael O’Brochta’s session, “How to Get Executives to Act for Project Success” (O’Brochta, 2008). Tom explained the value of complexity theory in project management. He also re-vitalized my knowledge of chunk and systems theory that I worked with during my academic research at the University of Miami in 1997. Michael’s remarks on project success were remarkable. It reminded me how important it is to practice common sense in dealing with stakeholders. One year later, at the PMI Global Congress EMEA in Amsterdam, Michael talked about “Great Project Managers” (O’Brochta, 2009). This session, too, encouraged me to delve deeper into the topic of project leadership.

While in Denver I also wanted to share my insights of the three leadership principles with others. For this purpose I organized an informal get together with Alex S. Brown, Joseph and Janice Lukas, Michael Trumper, Lev Virine, and Camper Bull. We shared our experiences and insights on effective project management and leadership. It was very insightful indeed. Outside the PMI Congress I met with Robert Urwiler, CIO of Vail Resorts. He liked the idea of the three leadership principles, but missed a decisive one: ensuring results. How true! From then on I was thinking of four leadership principles. The missing fifth principle of promoting performance “came” to me while outlining the book one year later. Until then I considered performance as being a part of collaboration. While this was and is true, I wanted to emphasize the significance and value of individual and team performance for project success. Hence, the development of five leadership principles.

Writing the book was a project. As such, it was a team effort. It would not have been possible to start, write, and finish the book without the help of others. It is impossible to individually thank the huge number of people who have contributed to the creation of this book. Next to the individuals already mentioned, I am indebted to the many people who shared their experiences and ideas on project leadership with me and challenged mine. They include Christian Baetzner, Elizabeth and James Bowman, Stephen Denning, Giancarlo Duranti, Jesse Fewell, Aslam Handy, John Ikeda, Ginger Levin, Robert Misch, Jim de Piane, Frank Teti, John Watson, Neal Whitten, Eddy Wong, and Stanislas Yanakiev. Thank you for challenging me and making me rethink and clarify quite a few points in my book.

Most of my professional training in project management I acquired working for two consulting companies that have been known for project management excellence: Cambridge Technology Partners and Sapient. The work environments, particularly at Cambridge, were magical and promoted performance on many levels. It was a great and inspiring time as well as a learning experience.

At SAP I had the wonderful opportunity to successfully apply my project management skills in one of the biggest software development projects, SAP CRM 2007. It was also during my time at SAP that I was privileged to attend the best project management workshop ever, conducted by Neal Whitten. I am honored to call Neal Whitten a mentor and role model.

I was fortunate to being part of an online review group of Stephen Denning’s new book The Leader’s Guide to Radical Management: Re-inventing the Workplace for
the 21st Century (Denning, 2010). I learned a great deal from him and the many comments in his review group. I liked the idea of an online review group so much that I started my own. This way I could share preliminary chapters of my book and receive valuable feedback. Members of this group were Christian Baetzner, Stephen Denning, Stefan Dieffenbacher, Traci Duez, Sally Elatta, Jesse Fewell, Bala Gopalan, Klaus Helling, Maria E. Kaufmann, Robert Misch, Patrik Olsson, Frank Schabel, Tibor Schiemann, Pedro Serrador, John Watson, Andreas Wirthmüller, Stanislav Yanakiev, and Henning Zeumer.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Michael Huber, an artist and graphic designer, who created the picture of the mountain guide in the Preface. The picture is an excellent illustration of the kind of leadership I am describing in the book.

It has been a wonderful experience working with the team of CRC Press. A special thanks goes to John Wyzalek, who first approached me about the book. Andrea Demby did a fabulous job as the project editor. Not being a native English speaker, I greatly appreciate the art of copyediting the manuscript. Thank you, Christine Morales, for your help.

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The book project may be over, but the journey to new insights in project leadership continues. From this perspective the book is only a snapshot of my own experiences, philosophy, and attitude toward leadership and project success at the time of writing the book. Still, I hope the book serves readers as a good guideline and companion for becoming and acting as an effective project leader. I invite readers to participate with me in an ongoing dialogue on project leadership. Share your experiences and let others learn from them. This way it becomes an ongoing journey for all of us.

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I am looking forward to hearing from you.
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Chapter 1

The World of Projects

Nothing astonishes men so much as common sense and plain dealing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882),
U.S. philosopher, essayist, and poet, from the essay "Art" (1841)

1.1 The Nature of Projects

So, what is so special about projects in the first place? Actually, nothing really. There have always been projects in our daily life, in both the business world and the nonbusiness world. The difference is that today people speak about projects differently. Maybe it is a modern word and people want to sound important when they say it. But still there is nothing new about projects.

An obvious advantage of projects is that they produce results in a predetermined and agreed-upon time frame. They can be a relatively short duration of only a day or two or long-running projects of several years. The fact is that projects produce results, tangible or not. They produce results.

So, what is the definition of a project? I suggest the following: A project is a set of activities directed toward commonly agreed-upon objectives to be accomplished in a certain time frame which is not endless. The direction of a project is given by its objectives. It is a unique endeavor.

In contrast to projects are ongoing activities or routine jobs. For example, assembling a car in a factory is not a project but, at least for the most part, routine work. Tax income form processing by an IRS employee is a routine job, not a project. Taking your kids to school is most likely a routine job.
The Project Management Institute (PMI) offers the following definition of a project: “A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result. The temporary nature of projects indicates a definite beginning and end. The end is reached when the project’s objectives have been achieved or when the project is terminated because its objectives will not or cannot be met, or when the need for the project no longer exists” (Project Management Institute, 2008, p. 5).

What all common definitions of a project have in common are that a project is a unique endeavor, framed by a given time frame defined by a set start and end date.

Let’s talk about some project examples. For most readers, projects in business seem most familiar: development of a new product, integration of new software, building a bridge or a house, and so forth. In politics, the planning of and running an election campaign can be considered a project. It has a set start date and a fixed end date, which happens to be election day, and it yields results. Another example is the founding of a preschool, from the initial planning date until opening day. Planning a summer camp for a youth group is a project. So is the preparation for a party, whether it is a family party or festivities for your organization or company. If you are involved in a club, a fundraising marathon is a project.

One can find endless examples of projects. Tom Peters (2007) goes as far as claiming that all white collar work these days is and actually has to be project work. “And not just any project, no matter how droning, boring, and dull, but rather what … I come to call ‘Wow Projects’: projects that add value, projects that matter, projects that make a difference, projects that leave a legacy …”

I was fortunate that most of the projects I worked on or managed, inside and outside of business, met these requirements. It was not the nature of the projects. It was the attitude of the whole team and its desire to create something special. All of my wow projects started with a clear vision; clear enough to become emotional about it. We could see, smell, and feel the expected end results. This was a strong driver in our day-to-day activities. Other attributes of these projects were that collaboration was working: roles and responsibilities were defined, team members’ expectations articulated and accounted for, and all were reviewed regularly, adapting them where necessary. We nourished teamwork and the freedom to act for a common goal. Creating and nurturing an innovative learning environment, an atmosphere where feedback was sincere, honest, and constructive, was another success factor. It was about helping and learning from each other. Last but not least, the wow projects were about delivering results, not just the final deliverable. Instead, we set weekly goals to work on and deliver. This meant we always had a good sense of accomplishment. Project success became success for all of us.

Projects are everywhere. They are prevalent. As such, it seems that everyone is, has already been, or will be involved in a project in one way or another. From this perspective, there is nothing special about a project. The distinguishing factor we will shed light on in this book is what project success entails. It is easy to talk about a project. It is another matter to lead a project to success.
Before elaborating on project success, let’s once more return to the key characteristics of a project. The multitude of characteristics are too numerous to list on this page or even in a single book. Let’s review the core ones.

Projects have objectives. They want to achieve something in a given time frame. They need not have a certain duration. Projects can be short-run, such as planning a birthday party, or long-run, such as planning a mission to Mars. The duration does not matter so much to the definition of a project as the fact that every project has an end date. Without an end date, it is most likely not a project and instead an ongoing activity or routine job. Hence, the duration of a typical project is project-specific. No official definition exists for what the duration should be.

A project is usually run by a team of people who serve in different roles. Usually it involves a project manager, whose job is to manage the project to success. In addition to the project team, people outside the project may have an interest in and influence on the project. Let’s have a closer look at all the roles, within and outside of the team.

The project team provides for both formal or informal roles. Often there is a distinct role of project manager. The project manager is in charge of the project; he or she is responsible and often accountable for the success of the project. Project players can also be found outside the inner circle of the project. Many people have a keen interest in the success — or failure — of your project, including the customers and the project sponsor who initiated the project. If you work in a corporate setting, your company may have a project management office that coordinates several projects and makes sure they are all in sync with the overall corporate strategy. Other important project players include line managers, who may compete for the same people who are working on your project.

In short, it would be wrong to assume that project players can be found only in the innermost circle of your project. Look outside of your core team and assess your environment. You will find more players than you initially thought possible. Some will play a more significant role than others and may require greater attention.

You may think that having your team in one location is normal. This may be so in some cases but not all. A single project can take place in one or numerous locations. Today’s business world is becoming smaller. A couple of years ago it could not be imagined that projects could be run on several continents. It is still the same team but not in the same location. Thanks to technology, it has become possible to communicate with team members no matter where they are located in the world. We call these teams distributed teams.

Going a step further, it is now possible to run a project and never meet your own team members. These are called virtual teams. This, too, has become normal business to many companies in our global marketplace. The same scenario can happen in your community, in a nonbusiness environment. Say, for example, you are organizing a soccer tournament. You have set up a planning committee, the members of which are distributed across your region. You talk to them on the phone and exchange emails, but may not meet until the day of the tournament. Yet you were part of a team. Thus, distributed and virtual teams are not limited to the business world. They are closer and more normal than you think.
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When you set up your project you take people from other groups. In a corporate environment your company is organized in different departments, called line organizations. These departments may follow routine jobs. Your project could be embedded in one department, or it may transcend department boundaries, affecting and involving several departments. In this case, your project adds another level of complexity to the organizational environment. This is called a matrix organization. If your project exists in its own environment without breaking or transcending any line organization you may be working in a project organization. Which one is best depends on the project. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Although the matrix organization is the most common in business these days, it is also the most complex. One of its greatest advantages can also be a source of potential conflict. Namely, on the one hand a matrix organization may facilitate cross-functional work across organizational boundaries. On the other hand, some organizational units may oppose this kind of work and withdraw their support of your project. Conflict is predetermined. It takes effective project management to cope with this challenge.

One thing is certain: your project does not exist in a vacuum. In rare cases your project may be totally isolated from others. For example, certain scientific research may fall under this category. Your research project may be isolated to you but not to others. You may not see any dependencies to other projects because your project may be the dominant one. But dependencies may exist if you rely on input from others or vice versa. There may also be interdependencies where other seemingly unrelated projects affect those that have an impact on yours. For example, you have obtained all the required input for your research, but then another project in your organization is given greater priority and a higher budget. That project will thus use money that was originally planned for your research. You may have had no interest in the other project, yet it affected you because now you may be short of money to fund your research.

In a nutshell, projects always exist in a social and organizational environment that can be complex and interdependent. Some projects are totally isolated, as mentioned above. However, for the purpose of this book I assume that every project exists in a social environment that is complex and interdependent. One can also assume that every project, to some extent, exists in a chaotic environment. It is not possible to account for all circumstances in your project plan. This is yet another reason to talk about guidance and leadership. Someone has to tell us which way to go and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, an answer to this, and project success. This cornerstone to project success is called project management.

1.2 Project Management as a Cornerstone of Project Success

First, let me be quite frank: project management is NOT the only or even single-most-important element to project success. It is a cornerstone, a single stone, not the whole house. It is a very important stone though. It gives the house a frame
with which to start. Some people may even consider it to be the first cornerstone.
I am not one of them. Project success is not equal to the appropriate application of
project management. It entails much more. The end result of your project matters
as much as how you get there. We will return to a definition of project success later.
For now, let’s record that project management can facilitate project success. It is
important and necessary for project success, but it is not sufficient. Before I explain
why this is so, let’s have a closer look at the scope of project management.

Project management is the activity that helps initiate, plan, conduct, monitor,
control, and close a project. It encompasses knowledge areas such as scope, time,
cost, quality, risk, procurement management, and basic management skills. These
management skills are common to other management activities, not project spe-
cific. Two examples include communication and team building.

Project management is important. Let there be no doubt. That is, a project can-
ot be run without project management, be it formal or informal. You need to have
something that holds things together. Underlying is the assumption that we need
some form of order to organize and run a project. Someone has to do something.
In this sense, project management helps set a frame, providing structure and order
to potential chaos. Without this structure a project leads to nowhere; it will most
likely fail, if it ever takes off.

Project management is not limited to one person. All team members can be
engulfed in project management. In other words, project management is not lim-
ited to the project manager. Keep in mind that we are talking about the general
meaning of project management and not the individual role of a project manager.

So, what are the key elements to project management? There are many, yes. This
is not surprising, given that we have just learned something about the complexity of
projects. Taking a linear approach to projects and project management, we discover
five key activities of project management: project initiation, project planning, project
execution, project monitoring and controlling, and, last but not least, project closure.
This is more or less the common, most widespread understanding of project manage-
ment. It is linear in the sense that it makes us believe that a project always goes through
these activity phases in this order. Indeed, this may be so in most projects. However,
in reality this assumption does not hold true anymore. Projects can fluctuate from one
phase to another. Figure 1.1 provides a graph of the first linear approach, where the line
depicts the planned, linear project progress. However, after project completion, if you
were to graph how things really went, it may look like the graph in Figure 1.2, where
the jagged line depicts the actual project progress, which is clearly nonlinear.

Sound too abstract and theoretical? Let’s take the example of building a house.
Let’s say you wanted to build your own home. You even have a picture in your mind
of how it will look. You can imagine what it will be like to move in and to live in the
home. You foresee the planning phase, talking with construction workers, agencies,
your bank, and so forth. You are ready to go. You have sketched a first blueprint
and have checked your finances. You think you are ready to start construction
when your bank calls to tell you that it needs another form of security from you.
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Or, 2 weeks after construction has started, you find out that the blueprint doesn’t include the second bathroom you asked for on the first floor. You must go back to the planning phase — parallel to constructing your house.

There is nothing wrong with the linear approach, taken as a model or framework. It certainly helps structure a project. But it does not naturally explain the key elements to project management. The graph in Figure 1.2 shows very clearly that real life can deviate from the planned line and may go in a different direction. Life is not linear. It is complex and oftentimes chaotic.

So, what are key common elements, even in chaotic projects? I think there are four:

1. **Vision, goals, and objectives.** Every project has a goal. It may not meet formal criteria of measurable results, but still, all projects are meant to achieve something.
2. **People.** Every project involves people, communication, and collaboration. I cannot think of a single project that does not involve people. Projects always exist in a social environment.

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Figure 1.1 Planned, linear project progress.

Figure 1.2 Actual, nonlinear project progress.
3. **Results.** Project management is aimed to help produce results. This means that someone or a group of people pick up something (a goal, objective, vision) and want to build toward it. They all want results.

4. **Management skills.** They could be technical or mechanical in nature, such as time, scope, cost, or procurement management, or they could have a social nature, such as communication and team building.

Where does this lead us with respect to a project manager? Who is this project manager? What role does he or she play? Are project managers like superman, running the whole show? Or are they the administrator of some plans? Maybe project managers just facilitate the team to perform and do the work and produce results? The answer is that there is no single answer. It is unlikely that the project manager is always superman, doing all the jobs, saving an ailing project, producing all results alone and taking the glory. There may be projects like this. However, I cannot think of a project I was involved in where this was expected from the project manager. With respect to the other possible roles: coach, administrator, facilitator, leader, and so forth, yes, there are many examples where this holds true. But again, it depends on the situation. Not too helpful, you might think? Take this with you: a project manager may fill many roles. However, one thing is certain: do not expect a project manager to be superman who saves the world — or your project.

### 1.3 A Common Theme: Projects in Trouble

Let’s have a look again at the key elements of project management: project initiation, planning, conducting, monitoring, controlling, closing and vision, objectives, people, communication, and results. All of these elements seem so simple and straightforward. And they are. Project management is a lot about common sense. It is not complicated if you think of these elements as the key to project management. But why then do so many projects fail? Let’s have a look at some numbers.

The Standish Group’s CHAOS report (The Standish Group, 2009a) contains some of the most quoted statistics of project success rates. Although this report analyzes mostly IT projects, the numbers can be translated to other industries and practices as well. Their press release of April 23, 2009, summarized the main findings of the 2009 report, stating that only 32% of all projects succeeded, in the sense that they delivered the required scope on time and on budget. According to the report, “44% were challenged which are late, over budget, and/or with less than the required features and functions and 24% failed which are cancelled prior to completion or delivered and never used” (The Standish Group, 2009b).

These numbers are frustrating and disturbing. No, they are alarming. Something must be wrong here. Why do so many projects fail? After all, it is all common sense, right? Well, what we can say at this point already is that common sense is not equal to common practice. This is a truism. Granted. And it is true. Actually it may drive
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people nuts when you ask them why they are not practicing what they think is normal and common sense.

Let’s have a look at some common themes of projects in trouble. There can be discrepancies between the goals, scope, budget, time, and quality expectations and requirements. There may be cost overruns. The team atmosphere is lousy. The boss doesn’t support you. Politics are involved that make life for your project miserable. Nobody cares about time limits; milestones are regularly missed and not monitored. Let’s look at some examples:

- Consider a public project of resurfacing a highway. The project budget and construction schedule had been defined early on. Unfortunately, the project turned out to be over budget and several weeks overdue.
- The goal of an IT project was to replace an existing software application in the marketing department of the company. Development work was finished on time but the marketing department refused to sign off on the new application because it did not meet its requirements.
- The target date for the rollout of a toll billing system for trucks on German major highways was originally scheduled for the middle of August 2003. It was repeatedly delayed. Finally, in January 2005 the system opened, 16 months after the original deadline.

I could go on citing examples of failing projects. But that is not the point. What is important to understand are the underlying reasons for project trouble and failure. The CHAOS report is one example for listing the most common reasons for project failure, and there are other reports available.

My own experience tells me that five key factors lead to project failure:

1. Lack of vision. The objectives are neither clearly defined nor mutually understood by those running and being involved in the project. Consequently, the scope of the project is vague and the timeline leading to the target end date is anything but realistic.
2. Lack of a functioning team. Instead, there is an accumulation of people who may or may not work together. Insular work is common. Communication is held to a minimum. Collaboration is poor.
3. The team as a whole or individuals do not perform as they ought to.
4. No reflection of its own behavior. People do not react to changes, but instead stick to old patterns. Learning does not take place.
5. No regular interim results. People may work together, but they do not produce results. If results are produced, they may be late or of low quality.

Does this apply only to projects in the business world? No. Take the following real example: In my hometown a group of parents was upset about heavy traffic. It was difficult and dangerous for their kids to cross one of the main streets in town.
All the parents agreed that a new traffic light was necessary, allowing the kids to cross the street safely by controlling traffic. They started collecting signatures. In less than 3 weeks they collected 200 signatures. This was an impressive number. They took the signature lists to the local mayor and asked for his support to release the necessary budget money. Unfortunately, the mayor was not convinced of the need for a new traffic light and turned down their request. The parents protested but could not change the mayor’s mind. Frustrated, the parents gave up and the project died.

What went wrong? First of all, this project did have a goal: a traffic light. Clearly this was not the cause for project failure. Problems arose because the parents focused solely on support from the mayor. However, the mayor was only one person, and the budget authority lay with the town council. Unfortunately, none of the town council members were informed or involved in the project. Another cause for the project failure was the lack of reflection on the parents’ part. Once the mayor signaled his skepticism about the project, the parents did not challenge him, nor did they ask themselves what else they could do to achieve the project objectives. Instead, they gave up.

As much as projects are part of everyday life, so is trouble and project failure, it seems. However, do not generalize this statement that most projects are doomed for failure right from the beginning. When talking about projects in trouble, one should distinguish between those that are merely ailing and those that are indeed doomed to fail. Ailing projects can be realigned to their original or modified objectives if the necessary changes are made. In the case of failing projects, you may soothe the pain, but it is impossible to rescue the project, or at least it is very difficult and unlikely that you will succeed. Project objectives are no longer achievable.

An example of an ailing project was the construction of the Olympic stadium for the Summer Olympic Games 2000 in Athens, Greece. Two years prior to the opening ceremony the construction was well behind schedule. The construction crews managed to catch up and barely finished the stadium before the Olympic Games.

An example of a failing project was the idea to build a high-speed train connection between the Munich Airport and the Munich Central Station in Germany. Whereas public resistance to the project was moderate at the beginning of the planning phase, it strengthened the more it became apparent that the original budgeted project cost would most likely explode and even double. The objectives of building and operating an economical train connection were no longer achievable. The project was canceled before the first construction worker could arrive.

Don’t think that if you are faced with or involved in a failing project there is nothing you can do. Regardless of your role, if you want to demonstrate leadership you can always act, and actually you must act. This is even more true in the case of an ailing project, which can still be saved.

You can try realigning the project, by yourself or with others. We will talk about possible approaches for realigning ailing projects later in this book. And even in the case of a failing project there are things you can do. You can run away, hold still,
swallow and wait for better times, hope for a miracle, or do nothing. Or, if you are the person in charge of the project, you can cancel the project. Indeed, canceling a project may be the only right thing to do. Don’t have the illusion that every project has to finish successfully. First of all, we have learned that a majority of projects do fail for various reasons. Once you realize that your project falls into this category you may seriously consider canceling it. It may save time and resources and, on your part, lots of nerves and energy.

Regardless of whether you have to cancel a project or manage to realign it, you can learn a lot from such project rescue missions. This is true whether you have been actively involved in such a situation or simply read about it. Failing and ailing projects offer valuable lessons. The main thing you want to learn is how to set up a project the correct way right from the beginning. You want to learn how to create and nurture your project right from its initiating stage. There is no law that projects first have to fail in order to succeed. When you start a new project, set it up for success from the beginning. That this is no illusion is shown in the following example.

Let’s return to the story of the futile attempt by parents to get a traffic light. One year later, a new group of parents formed. They were aware of the previous failed attempt to get a new traffic light. Although the new group had the same goals, they did not focus only on a safe passage for their own children. They expanded the vision to include senior citizens and everybody else who had a hard time crossing the road. Prior to starting their signature initiative they informed the town council members and secured their support for the project. In addition, they involved local schools and businesses. Last but not least, they talked with the local newspapers, which ran reports on the new project. Initially, the mayor was still skeptical. When he realized the project enjoyed strong public support, he changed his mind and jumped on the bandwagon. Within a few weeks the town council released the necessary budget money for the new traffic light. Six months later the new traffic light was in operation.

This example shows that just because a project failed before doesn’t mean it won’t work the next time around, provided we identify the root causes of the previous failure and resolve them, or just avoid them right from the beginning. It is therefore wrong to assume that most projects are doomed for failure or that troubled projects inevitably lead to failure.

1.4 Leadership and Project Success

Successful projects are not figments of imagination. They happen. Daily. It is up to you if you want your project to be one of them. Earlier we learned that project management is mostly common sense.

Well, now it is up to you to put this common sense into action. Practice common sense. Follow through. And inspire your team to follow you. Lead the pack and move along as a team.
This does not happen overnight. Some people think that it is sufficient for the team to acknowledge and practice common sense. I am saying that this is not sufficient. Yes, it takes a team to run a project. But it takes at least one person to lead the pack.

The right and appropriate project management skills are crucial. In addition, you must have an understanding of basic leadership principles, and you have to live them. The combination of project management and leadership principles yields project leadership. Corollary, not every project manager is a project leader.

The team is equally important for project success. The collaboration within the team and the performance of each individual team member as well as the performance of the team as one unit are critical factors for project success. Without a performing team it is difficult to secure project success. A performing team does not fall from heaven. It is possible that teams successfully organize themselves into a performing unit. There may even be the absence of formal project management as we know it. But don't be fooled. Every performing team still needs rigid boundaries within it functions.

Performing teams can evolve from within, but you have to ignite this fire of performance and you have to set boundaries within the team for it to function. If you want to generate results out of seemingly chaos you have to build structure that enables creativity, innovation, and results. Helping build and sustain this structure is the leadership we will be talking about in this book. Project management provides excellent tools to build this structure. By themselves the tools are not sufficient for project success. Unless you gear them into the right direction, they remain ineffective. If you want to secure project success you have to understand what it takes to set the right direction. Project management alone will not do the trick. It takes leadership — your leadership. Without project leadership there is no direction in project management. Leadership is the decisive factor for improving the chances for projects to succeed. Consequently, effective project management needs to have a solid foundation based in project leadership. Without leadership, chances are that a project will be “just another project.”

It is up to you which project you prefer. If you are interested in successful projects and what leadership principles help you achieve them, continue reading. Leadership principles are not rocket science. Why? Because the five leadership principles I propose in this book are based on common sense. They are not abstract ideas or figments of our imagination. They work because they are based on real-life project experience. Because they are common sense, it is not difficult to understand and apply them and demonstrate true leadership.

This book will tell you what it takes and how to get there. The first part of the book introduces the concept of the project leadership pyramid. This pyramid comprises the five leadership principles for project success. The second part of the book will put the project leadership pyramid into practice. It includes practical examples for how you can apply the five leadership principles in your daily project life. The final part of the book (Part III) details how you can become an effective project leader.
1.5 Application Suggestions

Think of two projects of your choice. One should be a project that could serve as an example of a project in trouble, the other one a project that runs or has run smoothly and to your full satisfaction.

1. Answer the following questions about each project:
   a. What are the objectives of this project? Are they mutually understood and even agreed by everyone involved in the project?
   b. Do you have clear roles and responsibilities in the project? How is the atmosphere on the project?
   c. Does everyone speak openly and freely? Or are communication channels obscured and blocked?
   d. Does every person and the team perform as expected? What is done if an individual or maybe even the whole team is not performing as expected and/or required?
   e. Do you stick to your plan? How do you react to changes in the project situation?
   f. How often do you deliver results? Do they meet minimal requirements?

2. Compare your notes and identify the three most important factors that affect or have affected the success of your project.

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