The 5 Team Leadership Principles for Project Success[·]

By Thomas Juli, Ph.D., PMP®, CSM®
Managing Director, Thomas Juli Empowerment Partners

Introduction

We all need and thrive for successful projects. But what exactly does this mean? Is project success the successful and timely delivery within budget? Or is it the path to glory? Do results always matter the most? What else does project success mean? And what does it take to achieve project success? Does success fall from heaven? Is it limited to a lucky few who happen to be in the right place at the right time? Is it coincidence? Or can we actually plan success?

There is no doubt that good project management is a critical factor of project success. That is, a project cannot 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.

If you want to generate results out of seemingly chaos you have to build structure that enables creativity, innovation, and results. Project management provides excellent tools to build this structure. They are important and necessary for project success. But are they sufficient? I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I claim that unless you gear them into the right direction, they remain ineffective. If you really 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. What it takes is leadership. And leadership is not limited to a specific role. It can be exercised by a single person or by a group of people. Projects usually if not always involve teams. Teamwork is at the core of every project. This implies that *project leadership* is and has to be *team leadership*, too.

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."

Based on my own experience in project management and the review of literature on leadership, project management, business, systems, and complexity theory I have identified five simple yet powerful leadership principles which, if applied systematically, can help you pave the path to project success. The five leadership principles for project success are as follows:

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

All five leadership principles combined encompass the core of effective project leadership and build the *Project Leadership Pyramid* (Figure 1).

[·] This article is based on the author's book „*Leadership Principles for Project Success*" published by CRC Press, Boca Raton, in August 2010, © by Thomas Juli, 2010. This is a book about project success. And it reveals a key to this success: project leadership. The book is filled with samples, templates, and guidelines that readers can immediately use in their projects, this practical guide covers five principles of effective project leadership and how they can be applied in daily project work. The book explains these principles in simple, nontechnical language and shows how they can set up, manage, and align projects for success. Additional information, including free reading samples and downloads are available at www.TheProjectLeadershipPyramid.net.

Figure 1: The Project Leadership Pyramid

The pyramid is a powerful image. I use this image for a simple reason: Although I think building vision is probably the most important principle of effective leadership, the bottom line most people see or want to see is results. Thus vision is at the top and results at the foundation of the pyramid. Collaboration, performance, and learning are necessary building blocks of the pyramid. They are framed by vision and results.

Visually speaking, when you approach a pyramid from a far distance, you first see the top. In our case, vision is at the top of the pyramid. As you get closer, you see more of the pyramid until at last you are standing in front of the first row of the building blocks (results). Looking upward, you may feel overwhelmed by the size of the pyramid. It may not even be possible to see the top of the pyramid (vision). Alas, you know that it exits. It was the first thing that you could see and what caught your attention. It guided you all the way to the base of the pyramid. If you now want to understand the secrets of the pyramid, you have to go inside. You have to explore the pyramid.

This article explains the structure of the Project Leadership Pyramid and reveals the secrets inside. Let's have a look at each principle one at a time.

Principle 1: Build Vision

> *Build vision.* Sharing a common project vision and goals and having the same understanding about tracking the progress towards this vision is one of the key factors in the success of a project and team.

One of the key characteristics of projects is that they are following SMART project objectives whereas SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-boxed. While this is indeed true for most projects it is not the most important element of a successful project. As much as projects don't exist in a social vacuum, the same applies to their project objectives. If however the objectives change how can you still ensure that the project is moving into the right direction? This is where a project vision comes in. A project vision goes beyond the SMART attributes of project objectives. As a matter of fact a project vision doesn't even have to be SMART. The secret of a good project is that it portrays a direction of the project in a way that people can relate to it. The right project vision is the foundation of every successful project. It is the cornerstone of success.

A project vision sets the overall picture of your project. Project objectives qualify this vision, make it specific. Both project vision and project objectives are crucial for project success. Together they set the direction and tone of your project journey. They complement each other. The vision inspires your journey. It defines the purpose of your project. Prerequisite is that you and your team know why the project was started in the first place. You and your team need to find the answers to the following questions: What is the driver behind the project endeavor? What are the issues it attempts to resolve? Who is affected by these issues and why? And, what would happen if these issues were or could not be resolved?

Understanding the motivation of a project constitutes the ground of a project vision. A project vision describes the resolution and what it means to those affected by it. The key to building vision is that that every person who is actively involved or affected by the project needs to be able to relate to the vision in his daily activities. Give them the chance to identify themselves with the vision. Involve them in building this vision and participate in making it real. This helps build rapport and the necessary buy-in from those people to realize the project. Make them fans of the vision. Let it constitute their motivation and passion. Let them rave about it.

The story of a visitor who was curious about a construction site illustrates the power of a common project vision. This visitor approached a group of workers to find out more about the construction. The first worker replied that he was a brick layer. The second worker told him that he was building a wall. Then he asked a third worker. This one explained that he and the other people in his team were building a cathedral. The interesting thing was that each worker was actually doing the same activity. Yet the motivations and their attitude differed a great deal. The third worker knew what he was devoting his time and effort to something big. His project may have been to build a wall. But it was the project vision of building a cathedral which enticed him.

A project vision without project objectives may give you an idea of the direction, but you may never get close enough to the destination to produce tangible results at a certain time.
On the other hand, project objectives without a vision may describe the desired end result and time frame, but they cannot inspire the necessary enthusiasm in your team to drive the project to success. They do not form an underlying meaning for the work.

There is one very important and significant difference between a project vision and project objectives: Project objectives are subject to change more frequently than a project vision. Whereas project objectives can change due to team external or internal influences without stopping the project, a change to a project vision also changes the purpose of the project. As such it may end the project.

Project leaders do not start a project without a project vision. Hence, if you and your team want to exercise leadership, you either build vision or make sure that it is in place, is crystal clear, and is mutually understood by every single person actively involved in the project. This is the meaning of the first leadership principle. Start with a unified project vision, know where you are coming from and where you stand before and during your project. Know your environment, know your potential, and identify your limits and overcome them. Build and involve your team and nurture effective collaboration across the board. This brings us to the second leadership principle: nurture collaboration.

Principle 2: Nurture Collaboration

> *Nurture collaboration.* A performing team yields synergy effects; the impossible becomes possible. This is why active team collaboration is crucial.

Project success is not about individual accomplishments. The project team delivers the project. As such, the team is the heart and soul of the project. Corollary, project success is, or at least should always be, the success of the team. Effective project leaders understand the value and huge potential of teamwork. This is why they actively nurture collaboration. They serve as role models and are part of the team. They thus actively participate and contribute to teamwork.

Collaboration is necessary for the team to achieve the vision and project objectives. By the same token, the project vision must include the concept of collaboration; it needs to be part of the vision as well as the project objectives. Collaboration is a means to achieve the objectives and thus to come closer to achieving the vision. It is a central element of every project. This is why vision and collaboration go hand in hand. You cannot move from the top to the bottom of the Project Leadership Pyramid without collaboration. On the other hand, collaboration without a common cause leads nowhere.

Collaboration is the juice of teamwork; it is what makes teamwork possible in the first place. It encompasses communication, individual and joint execution, as well as the delivery of results on both the individual and team level.

If you want to nurture collaboration you need to start with yourself. Be a role model to others: Share information openly. Give and accept open and constructive feedback. Be a good team player and work with your team.

Understand that the project is about the team. Project leadership becomes *team* leadership. It implies that if you want to be an effective project leader you have to be a good team player, too.

Nurturing collaboration can be hard at times. It takes a lot of effort and can be quite time consuming. The payoffs, however, are worth every minute invested. Having mutually understood and supported rules of engagement, characterized by open communication and effective collaboration, makes project life much easier. Once you have helped create an atmosphere of trust, team spirit, and fun, team synergy effects emerge. Magical

things can happen, productivity increases, and the quality of the team's deliverables is higher. Nurturing collaboration prepares the ground for performance on the individual and team level. As a project leader you want to cultivate this soil of performance. This leads us to the third leadership principle: promoting performance.

Principle 3: Promote Performance

Promote performance. Planning is good and important. At the end of the day you and your team have to perform. As a leader it is your responsibility to create an environment that promotes performance, on both the individual and team levels.

Building vision and nurturing collaboration are prerequisites for project success. Alas, they are useless if you cannot move your team to the performance stage. This is why you want to create an environment that helps promote performance. The following rules help achieve this.

Rule 1: Be a role model
No matter what project you are working on, be aware that as project leader you are a role model to your own team and others. Act as such. Walk your own talk and be true to your own principles. Demonstrate authentic leadership.

Rule 2: Create the right environment
If you want to promote performance in your team, take the time and find out what motivates each individual team member and the team as a whole. Discover what the individual team members and the complete team need to perform. Learn how you can help the team perform.

Rule 3: Empower your team
You have to enable your team to do its job and perform. Give your team the power and all the information it needs to do its job and perform. Give your team the opportunity to excel and have an active hand in project success.

Rule 4: Develop a solution-and-results orientation toward problems and risks
Performing teams focus on solutions and results rather than problems. A problem or risk is not seen as a potential show-stopper but a chance to learn and prove skills and competencies on the individual and group levels.

Rule 5: Invite productive competition
Productive competitiveness can actually help promote performance – provided that the competitiveness aims at improving team performance and is linked with collaboration and social sharing.

Rule 6: Let it happen
When you and your team have jointly built a common vision and developed collaboration rules, there should be no need to micromanage team members. Trust your team and let the team do its job.

Rule 7: Celebrate performance
"Look for behaviors that reflect the purpose and values, skill development, and team work, and reward, reward, reward those behaviors" (Blanchard, K. H., et al (2001). *High Five! The Magic of Working Together*. New York: HarperCollins. p. 190). Make sure that this celebration coincides with the successful project delivery.

Lasting performance can be achieved. It takes practice, training, endurance, and a results-driven attitude toward project challenges to develop and sustain it. Yet, performance and project success do not fall from heaven. You have to prepare and work for them, learning from mistakes and failures. There cannot be performance without training or learning. This leads us to the fourth leadership principle: cultivating learning.

Principle 4: Cultivate Learning

Cultivate learning. As humans we all make mistakes. Effective leaders encourage their teams to explore new avenues and to make mistakes and learn from them. An effective leader builds in sufficient time for the team to learn, create, and innovate.

As project leader, you serve as partner and coach for learning and information sharing. You *facilitate* learning. You are not the sole source of information. Instead, create a learning environment in your team. Set the expectation that you want everyone in your team to join and support you in cultivating learning for the purpose of the project.

Learning is not a one-time activity, say, in the form of formal training prior or at the beginning of your project. It is ongoing and should become daily routine in your team. Establish regular sessions with your team where you review past performance, share information about planned accomplishments, address and resolve impediments together. Invite external reviews. Outside views offer different perspectives; fresh and unspoiled perspectives. If they aim to help the team identify formerly unknown risks and issues and overcome them, external project reviews can be a great learning opportunity.

When you or your team make mistakes, learn from them. Correct your shortcomings, improve your performance, and continue to work toward accomplishing the project vision. Cultivate learning from the beginning of your project. It significantly increases the speed at which your team can perform and sustain performance throughout and thus secure delivery.

Create room for your team members to be creative, to try something new, share their ideas, and learn from each other. Plan in sufficient time for your team to think outside the box, beyond the known path traveled, and to find new avenues to reach the goals of the projects. Empower your team to perform, make mistakes, learn, and innovate. It helps reduce uncertainty as information flows more freely. Team members are not afraid of making mistakes. They see mistakes as learning opportunities and they help each other solve problems.

Note that in the Project Leadership Pyramid, *learning* is embedded between *performance* and *results*. For good reason. When you move from the pyramid level of *performance* to the level of *results* you pass through *learning*. This means if you want performance to yield the desired results you have to cultivate learning. There cannot be lasting performance without learning, and there cannot be results without performance.

Principle 5: Ensure Results

Ensure results. Delivering results is both a prerequisite and an outcome of effective project leadership. Project delivery is a team effort, not an individual effort. The effective project leader builds and guides the team to deliver results by incorporating the first four leadership principles.

Ensuring results is not solely about end results. Neither is project success and project leadership. The fifth principle calls on us that in all our activities we keep the project vision in mind and produce results that benefit the purpose of the project. Project success is not defined by a single product or service delivered at the completion of a project. It is the accumulation of the many results yielded from each and every principle in the Project Leadership Pyramid. Vision, collaboration, performance, and learning are just as important. They culminate in results. When you talk about project success, the path to project results matters too. Corollary, an effective project leader always looks beyond the delivery of results.

The fifth principle of ensuring results reminds us that we have to make sure the results of the other four principles are aligned with the project vision and objectives. They have to serve the project purpose. *Ensuring results* is thus not an activity focusing only on the final project deliverables. It appeals to us that all of our project activities shall be results oriented, keeping the end deliverables in mind. It is a call for solution- and results-oriented leadership.

Ensuring results offer excellent learning opportunities, which in turn help boost collaboration, improve performance, give rise to innovation, and thus move us closer to realizing the project vision.
Ongoing project results serve as a reflection of project leadership and how well the five principles of the Project Leadership Pyramid practiced. They reveal the true quality of team collaboration, team performance, and team learning. It is a form of quality assurance of effective project leadership for project success.

A Call for Holistic Leadership

No single principle is the most important. It is the combination of all five leadership principles that helps secure project success. Building vision is the principle to start with, but you cannot achieve results if you do not embrace all five principles together as one system. Leadership is not merely the sum of applying the five

principles. It is understanding and living the dynamics within each principle as well as all five principles as a unit.

If you want to gain a deeper understanding of one particular leadership principle, you need to account for the remaining four principles and how they relate to the one you are looking at. Corollary, we are not talking about one pyramid consisting of five parts. Rather, we have a 5×5 pyramid consisting of five principles, where each principle accounts for itself as well as the other four principles. This is illustrated in Figure 2.
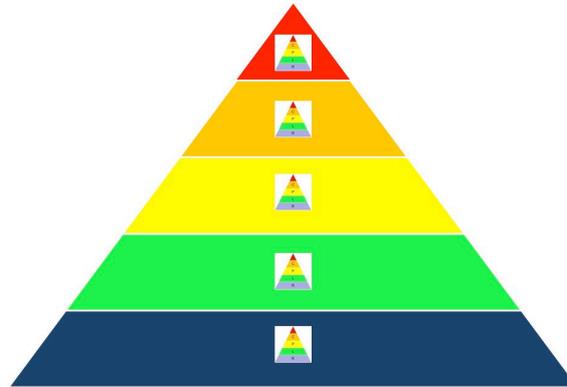
Figure 2: The 5×5 Pyramid

Applying the Project Leadership Pyramid in daily project life requires the project leader to practice all five principles constantly and consistently. It is an ongoing exercise. Depending on where you are in a project, there may be a stronger emphasis on one or two principles. But you cannot isolate one from the others. Holistic leadership comprises all five principles.

The Project Leadership Pyramid principles serve as a guideline to effective leadership and how it contributes to project success. Following and practicing them is no guarantee for project success, but they make it more likely. They address the core of project success and thus improve the chances for success significantly.

Project success starts and ends with project leadership. However, as much as the principles of the Project Leadership Pyramid can be applied by every team member regardless of his or her role, leadership is not limited to a single person or role. We know that as project leaders we cannot succeed by ourselves. We need the help and support of our teams. This is why it is important to build teams and empower them to perform and deliver. The five leadership principles can be applied by a single person, the project leader, or the whole team. In either way they help create the context for high-performance teams. Involving the complete team in building a project vision, nurturing collaboration, promoting performance, cultivating learning, and ensuring results helps create an atmosphere of mutual respect and commitment toward the project vision as well as the other leadership principles. It is team leadership which helps secure project success. Understanding the five team leadership principles can be the first step toward project success. It is up to you and your team to take this step and move forward.

Bibliography

Andersen, E. S., Grude, K. V., & Haug, T. (1987). *Goal Directed Project Management: Effective Techniques and Strategies*. London: Kogan Page.

Atkinson, R. (1999). Project Management: Cost, Time and Quality, Two Best Guesses and a Phenomenon, It's Time to Accept Other Success Criteria. *International Journal of Project Management*, *17*, 337-342.

Baccarini, D. (1999). The Logical Framework Method for Determining Critical Success / Failure Factors in Projects. *International Journal of Project Management*, *14*, 141-151.

Baker, B. N., Murphy, D. C., & Fisher, D. (1988). Factors Affecting Project Success. In D. I. Cleland & W. R. King, *Project Management Handbook* (2 ed., pp. 669-685). New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.

Bass, B. M. (1990). *Bass and Stodghill Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Applications*. New York: The Free Press.

Beedle, M., Bennekum, A. V., Cockburn, A., Cunningham, W., Fowler, M., Highsmith, J., et al. (2001). Manifesto for Agile Software Development. Retrieved from http://agilemanifesto.org/.

Blanchard, K. H., Bowles, S., Carew, D., & Parisi-Carew, E. (2001). *High Five! The Magic of Working Together*. New York: HarperCollins.

Blanchard, K. H., Carlos, J. P., & Randolph, A. (1998). *Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute*. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers.

Cockerrell, L. (2008). *Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies From A Life At Disney*. London: Vermilion.

Collins, J., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. New York: HarperCollins.

Cooke-Davies, T. (2001). The Real Project Success Factors. *International Journal of Project Management*, *20*(3), 185-190.

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Free Press.

Covey, S. R. (1991). *Principle Centered Leadership*. New York: Fireside.

Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. New York: Free Press.

Crowe, A. (2006). *Alpha Project Managers: What the Top 2% Know That Everyone Else Does Not*. Kennesaw, GA: Velociteach.

DeMarco, T., & Lister, T. (1999). *Peopleware: Productive Projects and Teams*. New York: Dorset House Publishing Company.

Drucker, P. F. (2006). *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done* (revised ed.). New York: Harper Paperbacks.

Geoghegan, L., & Dulewicz, V. (2008). Do Project Managers' Leadership Competencies Contribute to Project Success? *Project Management Journal*, *39*(4), 58-67.

Goffee, R., & Jones, G. (2000). Why Should Anyone be Led by You? *Harvard Business Review*, *78*(5), 63-70.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. E., & McKee, A. (2002). *The New Leaders: Transforming the Art of Leadership*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Greenleaf, R. K., Covey, S. R., & Senge, P. M. (2007). *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Ultimate Power & Greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Higgs, M. (2003). Developments in Leadership Thinking. *Organisational Development and Leadership Journal*, *24*, 273-284.

Juli, T. (2010). *Leadership Principles for Project Success*. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL

Katzenbach, J. R. (1997). *Teams at the Top: Unleashing the Potential of Both Teams and Individual Leaders*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Kelley, T. (2000). *The Art of Innovation*. New York: Doubleday.

Kotter, J. (1990). What Leaders Really Do. *Harvard Business Review*, *68*(3), 103-111.

Lundin, S. C., Paul, H., & Christensen, J. (2000). *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results*. New York: Hyperion.

O'Brochta, M. (2009). Great Project Managers. In *Proceedings of the PMI Global Congress 2009*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Project Management Institute.

Pellerin, C. J. (2009). How NASA Builds Teams: Mission Critical Soft Skills for Scientists, Engineers, and Project Teams. John Wiley: Hoboken, NJ.

Peters, T. J. (2007). The Wow Project. *FastCompany*. Retrieved from http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/24/wowproj.html.

Pinto, J. K., & Trailer, J. W. (1998). *Leadership Skills for Project Managers*. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

Rees, D., Turner, R., & Tampoe, M. (1996). On Being a Manager and Leader. In J. R. Turner, K. V. Grude, & L. Thurloway, *The Project Manager as Change Agent* (pp. 99-115). Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill.

Rossy, G., & Archibald, R. (1992). Building Commitment in Project Teams. *Project Management Journal*, *23*(2), 5-14.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Thomas, M., Jacques, P. H., Adams, J. R., & Kihneman-Wooten, J. (2008). Developing an Effective Project: Planning and Team Building Combined. *Project Management Handbook*, *39*(4), 105-113.

Todryk, L. (1990). The Project Manager as Team Builder: Creating an Effective Team. *Project Management Journal*, *21*(2), 17-22.

Turner, J. R., & Müller, R. (2005). The Project Manager's Leadership Style as a Success Factor on Projects. *Project Management Journal*, *36*(2), 49-61.

Ulrich, D., Zenger, J., & Smallwood, N. (1999). *Results-Based Leadership*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Waitley, D. E. (1980). *The Winners Edge: The Critical Attitude of Success*. New York: Berkley.

Zaccaro, S. J., Rittman, A. L., & Marks, M. A. (2001). Team Leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, *12*, 451-483.

Zenger, J. H., & Folkman, J. (2002). *The Extraordinary Leader. Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Zenger, J. H., & Folkman, J. (2004). *The Handbook for Leaders: 24 Lessons for Extraordinary Leaders*. New York: McGraw-Hill.