Program & Project Manager Power – What are your most important traits to achieve success

By

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"Happiness is the full use of your powers along lines of excellence in a life affording scope…'

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

'An Analogy…

Years ago as kids, when we all didn't know (or worry about) what project management was, our PMBOK's were comic books (we acknowledge that many adults read such material today). We couldn't wait for the next monthly or weekly issue to come out of Superman or X-Men, or the Fantastic Four, or Spiderman to name just a few. Of course, not all comic books involved superheroes, but many of them did. Each superhero in our imaginary worlds has at least one or more special skills or powers that made them champions for justice and "the greater good". Let's not forget the arch nemesis and villains like Lex Luthor, Magneto, or Dr. Doom that had similar powers but used them for the wrong intent.

Today we probably all know some of our colleagues as 'superheroes' for the efforts they give or the results they achieve individually and/or with their team. Are they considered our champions or Olympians in program and project management? Do you admire them for their strength the same way one might respect a person who can undertake admirable feats of physical endurance or run at incredible speeds?

If so, then let's assume that you are somewhere along the continuum of being weak or a very fit strongperson with your 'Program and/or Project Management powers'. As you should know, there are several kinds of 'power' in management such as real, formal, position, implied, reverent, proxy (acting), informal, expert, to name a few. What 'powers' does a Program or Project Manager need to have, and how can they use them to their advantage?

Our Observations and Suggestions…

Program and Project Managers work in all types of organizations and undertake all sorts of initiatives across a broad spectrum of functional disciplines. Some Program/Project Managers may be organizational atop the hierarchy while others are "lower down the chain". What truly distinguishes some as leaders in their program/project role, where team members eagerly look forward to working on the initiatives they lead?

In project and program management, just as in other professions, a great leader needs to have a mix of attributes. Take a moment to answer the question, "Who do I consider a great leader?" A few famous names may come to mind, such as military leaders (maybe Admiral Nelson of the British Navy), Heads of State (Abraham Lincoln, or Winston Churchill perhaps), famous sports captains (Bobby Moore of England's 1960's World Cup winning side, or the famous Pakistani cricketer Imran Kham) and/or Visionary business persons (such as Henry Ford, Richard Branson, or Enzo Ferrari). There is a fair chance that the people you thought of possess 'real power'. They may well have been the appointed or elected leaders for their entity or organization (maybe they were founders), with 'formal power', yet not all such men and women in these positions are considered true leaders. For example, Richard Nixon and Abraham Lincoln were both elected President of the United States of America and clearly had the formal power this position carries. However, history and general opinion often regards them very differently in the aspect of being great leaders. So even when formal power is bestowed, what makes some stand out as true leaders whereas others do not?

Role models are those that we look up to, and aspire to be like. These people are true leaders that demonstrate an emotional intelligence that picks up the needs of others, and a "persona" that others look up to. People that are genuine role models with 'real power' have the expertise to 'walk the talk' and are – crucially – people that others enjoy working with and for, often because they feel they can learn from them the most or they have the best chance of success and the rewards that can possibly be bestowed as a result of the success.

Formal power if you have it is advantageous, but it does not mean people respect you and want to work for and with you. A Program / Project Manager may be given formal power to lead their team, however, the nature of their role leads more often than not to them having to rely more on 'referent' or 'expert power'. A Program / Project Manager's power is primarily derived from the expertise and experience they possess in managing their work and/or the process or product contained within the chartered initiative. It is interesting to note that, in general, when evaluating projects and programs in Retrospectives, such lesson learned often reveal that the expertise of the Project/Program manager is not the only indicator of their qualities to effectively lead a team and achieve a successful outcome.

Examples of Differences…

Example #1: The Program Manager who has referent power but lacks leadership qualities – not good! Referent power can get them so far, but not "all the way" to getting things across the line. A lack of true leadership qualities can be resolved through coaching, as long as the person is willing to practice and learn what leadership is. It is the responsibility of the organization to make sure that people in Program Manager roles have leadership qualities.

Example #2: The Project Manager who has expert power and is seen as a real leader because of her emotional strengths, over and above the Program Manager they work for~! This can cause complications of authority between the Program and Project Manager.

Example #3: The team member who only has informal power but who really is the 'true leader' in the team. This diminishes the role or the Program and/or Project Manager, and will often lead to lack of role clarity, varying team morale and project issues caused by structure and inconsistent communications. The "True leader" may be leading the team, but may not follow the routines and disciplines of good project management. If this is the case, the work gets done, but lack of processes could cause rework, delays, and add risk to the project, and potentially affect the project's final outcome and the formal handover to operations.

Our Conclusion

As in other professions, the following traits can help a Program or Project Manager to be a truly effective leader:

1. Charisma (described in the Oxford English Dictionary as "having compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others") – whether charisma can be taught or not has been the subject of much debate, but there is little doubt that it helps to have it!
2. Be an Expert in Management – not necessarily the detailed work to deliver the outcome. A good leader will surround themselves with technical/industry experts and will ask the right questions at the right time.
3. Be Enthusiastic and have a "sense of positive urgency" to getting things done.
4. Be a good coach to your team members.
5. Be good at motivating others.
6. Take the time to build relationships with people.
7. Be able to see big picture and to ensure that all team members can see it too, as well as identify their own measures of success that relate back to the big picture.
8. Be recognised a winner..Past successes are good..People like to follow a winner…make sure you celebrate successes and "wins" when you achieve them – and recognise the efforts of your team at all times.

If a Program / Project Manager has the attributes above, regardless of the official type of power they have in the organization, they have the best chance of succeeding and being deemed a good leader that people want to follow and achieve success with.

Summary Extract:

A Program or Project Manager needs to have a mix of attributes, but they have only two kinds of power: 'expert' and 'reverent or formal' power. We believe that power or influence for a Program / Project Manager's success primarily comes from their leadership qualities, and their expertise and ability to 'walk the talk'. Manager's power is primarily derived from the expertise

and experience they possess in managing their work and/or the process or product contained within the chartered initiative. It is not necessary to know everything about the project being delivered, but the ability to energise people into action and to work towards a common goal, whilst recognising that each individual may have different perspectives on the meaning of success, is a prerequisite to achieving success.