

LEADING WITH POWER IN A PROJECT BASED ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

Leading with power in a project based organization is about earning legitimacy in complex organizational settings. Years of experience, including having fun and applying passion, persistence, and patience, enabled us to get better results from project-based work. This paper guides PMs and their managers to discover and create a more project-friendly environment. Examples and insights illustrate how to create win-win political victories. Project management is about getting results, and that requires power. Projects are the means to create value, so a project based organization consists of people and attitudes that supports its project managers. Becoming a more effective project manager means develop the ability to:

- Articulate the value of projects to the organization
- Enthusiastically embrace the tenets of a PBO
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- Assess your environment and sources of inspiration
- Create an environment for successful projects
- Discover and lead a change process
- Design an effective project office (even if it's a Project Office of One)
- Achieve excellence in project sponsorship

Keywords: Project Based Organization, Power

Resumen

El liderazgo en una organización orientada por proyectos está relacionado con ganar legitimidad en la configuración de organizaciones complejas. A través de años de experiencia, mediante la pasión, la persistencia y la paciencia se pueden conseguir unos mejores resultados en los proyectos. Esta comunicación lleva a los directores de proyectos y sus directivos a descubrir y crear un entorno de proyecto más amigable.

La gestión de proyectos está relacionada con la obtención de resultados, y eso requiere poder. Los proyectos son un medio para crear valor, por lo que una organización orientada a funcionar por proyectos, se compone de gente y aptitudes que dan soporte a sus directores de proyecto. Llegar a ser un director de proyecto más efectivo significa desarrollar habilidades para:

- Articular el valor de los proyectos para la organización
- Abrazar con entusiasmo los principios de la PBO
- Evaluar el entorno y las fuentes de inspiración

- Crear un entorno para el éxito de los proyectos
- Descubrir y conducir un proceso de cambio
- Diseñar una oficina de proyectos efectiva
- Alcanzar la excelencia en el “Project Sponsorship”

Palabras clave: Organización orientada a funcionar por proyectos, Liderazgo.

1. Introduction

Leading with power in a project based organization is about earning legitimacy in complex organizational settings. Years of experience, including having fun and applying passion, persistence, and patience, enabled us to get better results from project-based work. This paper guides PMs and their managers to discover and create a more project-friendly environment. Examples and insights illustrate how to create win-win political victories.

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- Create an environment for successful projects
- Discover and lead a change process
- Design an effective project office (even if it's a Project Office of One)
- Achieve excellence in project sponsorship and build an organization that:
- Operates from its strengths
- Applies a variety of disciplines flexibly
- Effectively uses power and politics to GET RESULTS
- Appreciates PMs
- Adapts to changes
- Acts authentically, with integrity

The objective for this paper is to apply universal principles to optimize project results in politically charged environments. The presentation provides a fun multimedia experience to make the concepts meaningful and memorable.

2. Project Value

One of the first tools in a project manager's toolkit is the ability to articulate the importance of project management to the organization. A big complaint from project managers everywhere is that their managers and executives do not understand or appreciate the project management process.

This arises because the managers did not receive any formal training on project management or possibly because no one took the time to reflect upon or take the time to analyze how much work gets done in the organization through projects. But the bosses got the job done when they were at this point in their careers, right? Yes, they often did it by brute force, by the seat of their pants, by super-human effort of many people over long hours, often with many “dead bodies” in their wake. Stress and burnout are not sustainable practices. They did not know there is a better way.

While project management has been around since construction of the pyramids and buildings, the profession of project management is relatively recent. Project management now applies to new product development as well as daily tasks. We have the Project Management Institute’s disciplined body of knowledge, advanced college degrees and certification in project management, and more sharing happens via newsletters, journals, seminars and conferences. In essence, your boss (or customer) may not have had the benefit of this explicit knowledge and may be expecting you to follow the old story. You now have a new story to follow. A wise investment is to point out the value of project management. Efforts to create an environment for greater project success are justified only when people clearly value project-based work.

Answering these questions helps:

- Estimate of work accomplished by projects in % (compared to other, routine or process work)
- Estimated number of projects underway
- Estimated budget for project work

An example statement generated by students in a professional development course was:

The value that projects bring to each of our companies is the creation of new products and/or services that will generate revenue for the companies in the future. Projects help keep people focused and bring structure and clarity to the work force.

Other seminar discussions resulted in statements on the value of project management like:

*Get things done.
Get bottom-line results that meet your expectations!
If You Don’t Do it, You Die.*

Here is a published statement that definitely illustrates the importance of project-based work:

“Because [our company] manages many of its works as projects, we do about 12,700 projects a year. On a day-to-day basis, more than 60 percent of our 22,000 employees are working on projects, and our company-wide application of project management methodologies helps these employees meet our customer focus requirements while the company strives for overall internal management improvement... These tools have given us the ability to grow our business and improve how we execute our projects” (PM Network February 2005, p. 19).

Take the time to “sell” others on the value of project management as a disciplined process to create the prosperity that is so vital to the organization.

Project managers are more effective when they are passionate in their approach to projects and people. They need to reinforce best practices, often more than once, and explain why those methods make the most sense. To ensure that project activities get done the right way, project managers need to be persistent. And in taking the necessary time to talk with people and solve problems requires that they be patient. All three of these P-words may be regarded with disdain by certain managers.

Managers need to spend time with every project team member, ironing out misunderstandings, miscommunication, and varying perceptions. Managers in a sponsor role need to listen to many team members, even when the messages conveyed are not easy to receive. If you focus on people as human beings, language, culture, and unique behaviors become less of an issue. When people feel valued, they are more proactive, and performance improves.

Different cultures have different values, so international team members may misunderstand the approach to executing activities and tasks that are prescribed in another country. Good managers clarify reasons for their priorities and help people adapt to the environment in which they work. A lack of cultural sensitivity distracts them from the tasks at hand. In a world of globalization, it is important that managers be inspired to advance in their understanding of other cultures and behaviors. Managers acting as project sponsors need to demonstrate their own passion to team members. All these human issues surface as project management and sponsorship issues.

3. The Discovery Process

Organizations and people do not need to be “fixed.” Avoid a “deficit discourse” that dwells on what's wrong or needs to be developed. Instead, discover strengths. Establish shared values and put them into practice. Early in each project, take the time to emphasize the importance of each person's contribution and how that person contributes to the organization. Make it a high priority to respond to every inquiry, share what thinking processes are going on, develop and use consistent criteria for decision-making, communicate all news whether good or bad, provide reflective answers to questions, tame anxiety responses and provide space for others to come through, and generally become known for quality responses. Appreciate the ebb and flow of team dynamics—using discretion about when to push and when to let a natural energy drive the process. These steps demonstrate that the leader pays attention to the people responsible for success.

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider) is a discipline that guides this focus on people and organizational strengths. Exhibit 1 shows the stages in how to approach work and changes within any organization. For instance, one client wanted to develop a more cohesive project team. We conducted exploratory interviews across the organization. The *Discovery* approach was to interview each member with the questions:

- What attracted you to this team? (initial excitements, impressions)
- What do you value most—about yourself, your job, the organization?

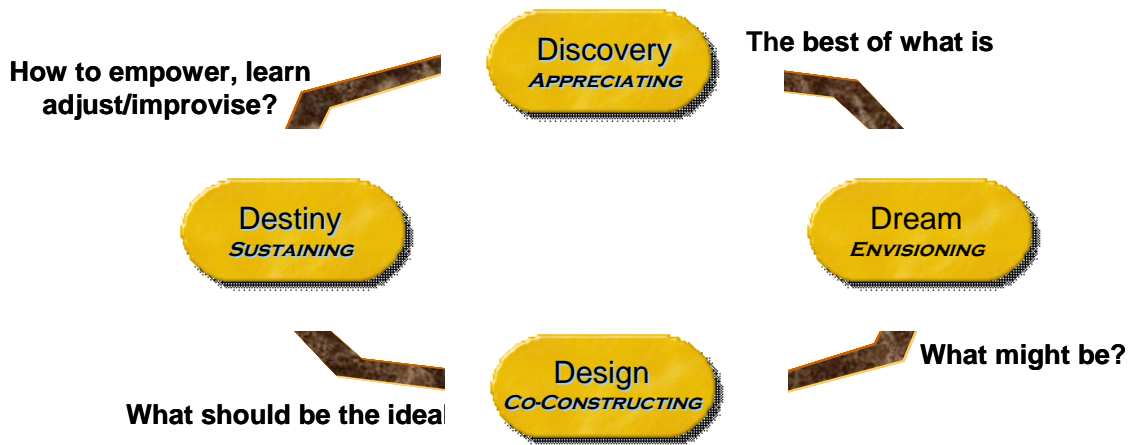


Exhibit 1. The Four D's of Appreciative Inquiry

- What are the core values of this organization, the key things without which this organization would not exist?
- Recall a time when you felt most alive, involved, joyful, peak form, or excited:
What made it an exciting experience?
Who were the most significant others?
Why were they significant?
Tell a story about that time (what doing, what others did, how you felt)
- What was the most exciting, surprising, or humorous thing that occurred with this team?
- What is the single most important thing the team has contributed to your life?
- What is the essence or life-giving force of this team?
- What could (or should) be the most important outcome from your experiences with this team?

Some of the answers illustrate the strengths and values in common that people shared:

- *Appreciate that people are not pigeon-holed, okay to go out of scope of job, do the right thing, not cutting corners*
- *Bug people to move out of status quo, see gems, winners*
- *Financial responsibility, sense of being in wealth, pushing human capacity*
- *Leading international team responsible for standardizing processes across multiple countries—wonderful team, motivated, worked things out, political but straight forward, wonderful management support, room to make decisions, did what others said couldn't be done*
- *Understood organization & political environment, well respected by peers, could get job done, believed in mission, committed, willing to fight for vision*
- *Huge stake in delivering something, all given little piece, expectations set to deliver,*

cohesive group, working in real time, complex

- *Without them, we wouldn't be around, all on same vision, they were living the vision with us and embracing it*
- *They took idea, delivered on promise or went further; others are doing it, expansion; trust that others do well, respect, meaningful way to operate*
- *Put into situation not want to be in, take me out of it, boss talked me into it, case very clear, w/ data; turnaround after over, frightening, got so involved, came to realize I am the best person, drew upon strengths; presentation weary, practiced with team leader, got coaching*
- *Accidental project manager, shared passion and vision carried us through—became “my vision,” common vision, trust*
- *Group brought together with varied experience, given huge responsibility that would change how entire company operated, opportunity to learn about people, challenging issues, HR skills acquired, rose to the occasion, amazing*
- *All people were there, displayed visions, kept reinforcing with actual items, possible because highest level of management support, yes this will work, true management buy-in, getting smoother, projecting issues and solutions, empowered (not passive), work getting done; enthusiasm, measures of success—quantitative & qualitative, believed what doing, hired very good people—came because heard of us, type of organization being built, vision & values, zero turnover*

A second step is to *Dream* of a more desired future state. This step involves finding ways to reinforce existing strengths and positive work experiences, especially since the first step revealed that people thoroughly enjoyed intense activities directed toward an important goal. Focus in facilitated sessions on crafting powerful purpose, vision, values, and mission statements that become living, breathing statements to guide all members of the community on a common path.

The third step of *Design* is to assign or write and review role and responsibility guidelines. We arranged sessions across the organization to share statements and results of interviews that reflect what works well and what can be when those behaviors are reinforced. Encourage inquiry and dialogue so people believe and commit to this approach.

The fourth step of *Destiny* is to act on the new design, reinforce through training and practice sessions, and reap the benefits of people operating in their strengths. After awhile, it becomes important once again to reassess what is going on and determine if new capabilities have been discovered.

The appreciative inquiry tool is so powerful that it can even dwarf or minimize the need to point out what people do wrong. By reinforcing strengths, weaknesses fall by the wayside.

4. Creating an Environment for Successful Projects

For managers concerned about getting better results from projects within their organizations, it is important not only to know *what* to do but also *why* environmental conditions need to improve and then determine *how* to implement the concepts. Exhibit 2 overviews an organizational process of support for project management. It portends to a change management process for applying leadership to evolve a project-based organization.

The cohesive theme is to assemble ten pieces of a puzzle that represent an environment for successful projects:

- 1) **Change to project-based organization.** Recognize the value that project outcomes provide to the organization. Realize that a project or program based organization is key to survival. Support cultural changes to revitalize the organization around projects. Organize upper managers in teams that model desired behaviors.
- 2) **Strategic emphasis for projects.** Clearly link each project to organizational goals. Use a prioritization process that everyone understands and supports. Develop and run the organization according to a *plan of record*.

Example: Categorize projects into strategic “buckets” that fulfill organizational goals, determine what percent of the whole goes into each bucket (in dollars or other resources), prioritize projects according to criteria within each bucket, and resource projects in priority portfolio...but not doing all projects. order until resources within that bucket are used up. The effect is a “do it all” balanced

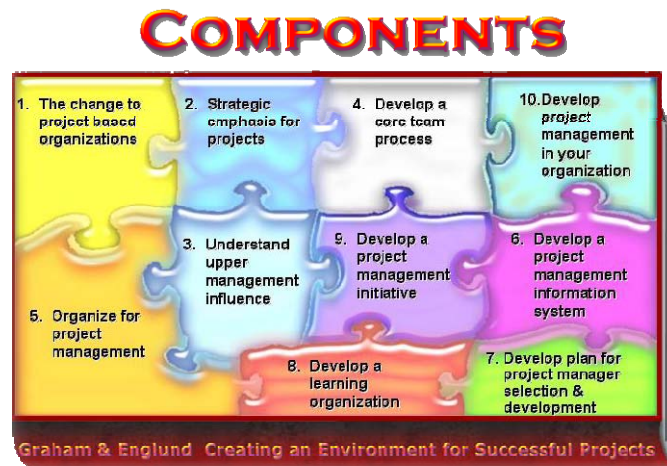


Exhibit 2. Components of an Effective PBO

- 3) **Understand upper management influence.** Recognize that many upper managers did not have the benefit of the current body of knowledge about project management and may be guided by the “old story” about running an organization, such as commands and control. The “new story” is an organic organization based around projects. Support the planning process. Negotiate reasonable deadlines. Be careful to support, not interfere, in times of anxiety (when most management mistakes are made!). Reward desired behaviors on projects.
- 4) **Develop a core team process.** Define a core team that directs and stays together during the entire project—knowledge workers are not interchangeable parts. Support trust building, and clearly define roles and responsibilities.
- 5) **Organize for project management.** Set up systems that focus on results, not controls. Provide the necessary scoping and authority to project managers. Align projects with customers, and involve end-users throughout projects. Design effective decision-making processes. Recognize that there is no one perfect organizational structure. Ensure at least that the organization does not get in the way of doing projects.
- 6) **Develop a project management information system.** Use information to relieve anxiety. Ask stakeholders how they will use the information and provide the right information at the right

time to answer those questions. Eliminate benefits of poor communications by placing greater value on good communications. Highlight interdependencies of projects across the organization.

- 7) **Develop a plan for project manager selection and development.** Put leaders at the helm who have an aptitude for producing results by working with people and who are trained in the profession of project management. *Be careful* not to support the accidental project manager syndrome—promoting people into the profession because of achievement in other areas or because he or she suggested the project. The project manager skill set is different.
- 8) **Develop a learning organization.** View each project as an opportunity to produce a result plus improve the project management process. Perform project reviews and take action on key findings. Make learning a priority. Develop organizational project management competency. Set expectations that working on projects is a positive experience and can be fun. Implement a “gardener’s” approach to the environment.
Example: A gardener cannot command a tree to grow. He or she creates environmental conditions that support the tree to flourish...soil, nutrition, air, and sun.
- 9) **Develop a project management initiative or project office.** Organizations improve their ability to get results when they make a concerted effort to get better at doing projects. Form a group to lead the continuous improvement of project management across the organization by offering training, consulting, facilitation, and sharing of best practices.
- 10) **Develop project management in your organization.** Focus on the project environment and culture. Develop a project management initiative. Assess the current state, benchmark with others, define an improvement plan, implement changes and track progress. Recognize the contributions of program and project managers and the value of the project management process. Invest in training.

The recurring theme, and glue, that holds the pieces together within any organization is the authenticity and integrity displayed by its leaders. Authenticity means that managers believe what they say. Integrity means that they do what they say they will do, and for the reasons they originally stated. Demonstrating these values in action often makes the difference between success and failure. Avoid “integrity crimes” where people feel violated by actions inconsistent with words. Demonstrate through a project portfolio management process, driven by upper managers working together as a team, how each project contributes to organizational strategic goals. Managers who do not “walk the talk” seldom motivate people to follow them. By linking intentions, words, and actions, authenticity and integrity connect the head and the heart. They help leaders establish credibility among followers. A legitimate leader achieves the ultimate reward: recognition by followers that the leader is credible and worthy of following.

5. Leading Change

Recognize that organizations are political. A commitment to positive politics is an essential attitude that creates a healthy, functional organization. This may be a change for the organization. Create relationships that are win-win (all parties gain), actual intentions are out-in-the-open (not hidden or distorted), and trust is the basis for ethical transactions. Determining what is important to others and providing value to recipients are currencies that project leaders can exchange with other people. Increased influence capacity comes from forming clear, convincing, and compelling arguments and communicating them through all appropriate means. Effective program managers embrace the notion that they are salespersons, politicians, and negotiators. Take the time to learn the skills of these professions and apply them daily.

The world of physics revolves around power. Since project management is all about getting results, it stands to reason that power is required. Political savvy is a vital ingredient for every project

manager's toolkit.

Understand the power structure in the organization. Clues to a power structure may come from an organizational chart, but how things get done goes far beyond that. Influence exists in people's hearts and minds, where power derives more from legitimacy than from authority. Its presence occurs in the implementation of decisions.

Legitimacy is what people confer on their leaders. Being authentic and acting with integrity are factors a leader decides in relations to others. In contrast, legitimacy is the response from others. Position power may command respect, but ultimately how a leader behaves is what gains whole-hearted commitment from followers. Legitimacy is the real prize, for it completes the circle. When people accept and legitimize the power of a leader, greater support gets directed toward the outcome; conversely, less resistance is present.

Power is not imposed by boundaries. Power is earned, not demanded. Power can come from position in the organization, what a person knows, a network of relationships, and possibly from the situation, meaning a person could be placed in a situation that has a great deal of importance and focus in the organization.

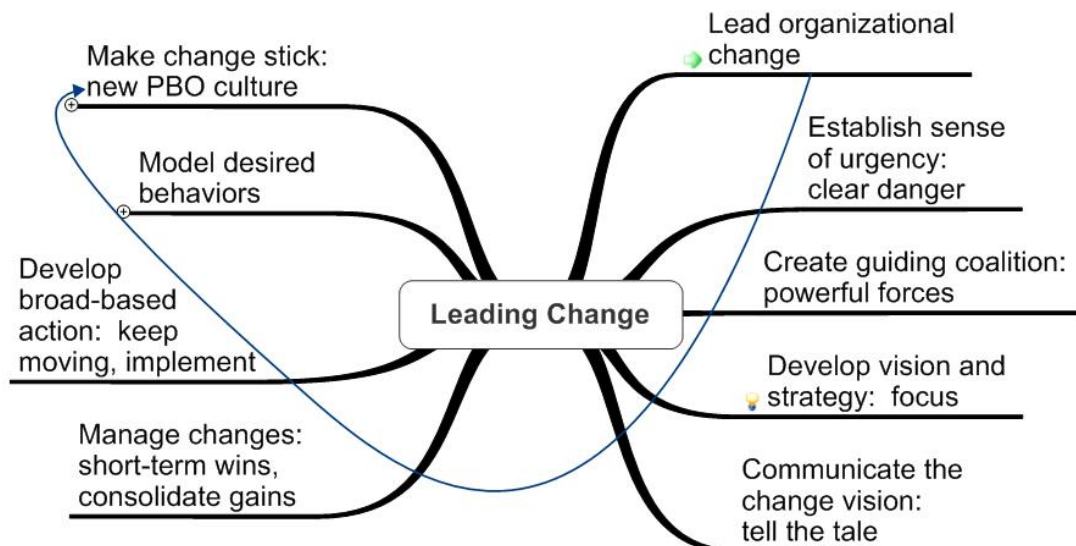


Exhibit 3. Process for Leading Change to a PBO

Start any new initiative or change by thinking big but starting small. First implement a prototype and achieve a victory. Plan a strategy of small wins to develop credibility, feasibility, and worth ability. Get increased support to expand based upon this solid foundation.

This advice is predicated on implementing a well-documented change management process. Exhibit 3 illustrates the essence of this process. Effective influencers, and project managers by definition, are typically creating something new so that means they are also an agent of change, or *change agent*. Embrace this process by, first of all, understanding it is a change process, then getting clear about the problem being solved, identifying and lining up a coalition of powerful forces, getting clear about where you are going and how to get there, and harnessing internal support to do it. These create the conditions for making change.

The next steps are to manage the change, by starting out small and then developing broader based actions that build upon successes. Throughout it is imperative to model desired behaviors through authentic leadership, acting with integrity, being credible, and earning legitimacy.

The really hard part comes in the third stage, trying to make the change stick. Organizations may be stretched like a rubber band; when the change agent leaves or moves on, the end of the rubber band he or she pulled on snaps back. The organization reverts to how it always did things before. To get past this point, apply L^2M^2 : leadership, learning, means, and motivation. Leadership is the process of declaring that the existing reality must change. It starts the mental restructuring that is the change process. This is intensified and reinforced by Learning. This process helps to complete the mental restructuring and provide a common map for everyone to follow. It is important that ALL PARTIES to the change are subject to the learning, or the process will not be complete. Means provides the artifacts necessary to consolidate and implement the changed behavior. Motivation issues ensure that the changed behavior prevails over time due to positive reinforcement and negative consequences. All four factors need to be present in abundance to make change stick. Apply these factors to the ten components in Exhibit 2.

6. Proactive Sponsorship

The ideal scenario to lead change, with power, towards a fully operational project-based organization is proactive sponsorship—getting a project sponsor who is committed, accountable, serious about the project, knowledgeable, trained, and able not only to talk the talk but also to walk the walk. Such people are trustworthy in all respects. Their values are transparent and aligned with the organization and its strategy. Such sponsors protect the team from disruptive outside influences and back the team up when times are tough. Sponsorship requires taking an active role during the whole project. Serving as the project sponsor requires making a commitment to define, fund, defend, and support major activities from the start to the end. The task continues to ensure that the benefits the project intended are realized.

It is far better to start out with the right sponsor than having to correct a bad sponsorship situation down the road. That is why it is so important to select the right sponsor and train the person for the role. An organizational culture committed to this approach is a desired goal. It represents a well-developed, mature organization. Do it right the first time to save yourself from grief later on. The best way to sustain good sponsorship is to start out with good sponsorship. Anything less is remedial.

Sponsor activities and behaviors vary with the organization. The lack of good project sponsorship is a major cause of difficulties and problems on projects. Well-executed sponsorship by senior executives brings better project results.

Key lessons are these:

- The absence of thoughtfully assigned sponsors with well-defined and clearly understood responsibilities is a major cause of project difficulties and frustrations.
- Complex programs that cross internal and external organizations require a structured approach to sponsorship.
- Senior executives are more effective when they understand their role as sponsors and do not delegate this responsibility to lower levels.
- Well-executed sponsorship brings financial results, increases motivation and participation, and improves the impact of project-based work on the organization.

A good project sponsor needs to deal with resource availability, minimize functional barriers, get help from senior management, and be sure the right tools are used. A key obligation of the project sponsor is to create the right environment for project success. Problems and issues that arise from people working on projects are greatly eased when effective sponsors are fully present and skilled

in fulfilling their roles. Achieving excellence in project sponsorship is every organization's "dream team."

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