Are You an Accidental Project Leader?

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Are You an Accidental Project Leader?

Written by Jason Myers – 11/28/18

If you've recently been put in charge of an important project or initiative, you're probably experiencing a range of emotions, from excitement to possibly some uneasiness.

You're excited to get started! After all, it's something new that's never been done before, so it's important that it succeeds.

But, wait. You'll need decisions, deliverables and input from others to cross the finish line.

Who needs to be involved, and how do you get their buy-in? What risks could derail it? How will it look for you if it falls apart?

Congratulations! You're now what we call an "accidental project leader."

"But I'm not a project manager," you say? "Those skills don't apply to me."

Well, hold on.

Stick with me for a minute because there's something you probably don't know.

Collaborative Leadership Skills — Not Just for Project Managers

Anything new or improved that you want to accomplish—from developing a new product or website to fixing your invoicing system—is achieved through projects and initiatives.

Collaboration on projects and initiatives are the primary ways in which innovation happens. In other words, you have a problem, so you come up with a project, or series of projects, to create that new solution. But as a project leader, if you're coming up with the tasks and assigning them, you're not collaborating—even when you solicit input from team members.

Complex problems require collaboration when a solution demands the specialized input of subject matter experts.

So, if you want to be an innovative leader, it makes perfect sense to learn how to lead teams collaboratively and to help them perform at the highest possible level to give your projects and initiatives the greatest opportunity for success.

Consider for a moment that the Project Management Institute estimates that fewer than one-third of all projects actually succeed.

That's a small number, and even increasing it by a few percentage points has an enormous upside.

But why do so many projects fall apart in the first place?

Why Classic Project Management Fails

For decades, complex organizations crippled by functional silos have tried to restructure reporting relationships to encourage greater collaboration among teams and their members. Project management evolved to help guide this collaboration. Ironically, project management has become its own function and silo, with some organizations even creating dedicated project offices.

If organizations really wanted to promote cross-functionality, they would set up a steering council(s) made up of leaders with shared accountability for the portfolio of projects. These individuals decide which projects get added to the portfolio and prioritize that portfolio so that all project members have the same set of priorities.

Instead, companies typically abdicate that responsibility to the project office, who must govern the project system without having any cross-functional authority over leaders who initiate—and assign resources to—those projects. It's not a job that dedicated project managers can succeed at. Only a governance team of leaders from across the organization can oversee the project portfolio. As a result, too many projects get launched, with most—if not all—considered a number-one priority.

Another problem with classic project management is that the customer is considered "king," which grants permission to make unreasonable requests and demand compliance. In this scenario, they can ignore the necessary trade-offs between scope,

schedule and cost—otherwise known as the triple constraint—and just insist that the internal supplier "get it done." This is another way in which people get overloaded with project work.

If you're seeing how easily the current system overloads workers, it gets worse.

Standards and Certifications, But Not Solutions

The project management industry has built standardized practices for project management—processes, methods, approaches and tools—and created certifications around them.

While certification can be very useful, those standards generally assume that the project manager does the planning and problem-solving work and thus take a directive approach to project leadership. These standards don't teach leaders how to lead collaboratively, nor do they teach teams how to participate in projects.

Don't get me wrong. These classic project management tools still play a role. For example, if you're in construction and you're building a high-rise, implementing repeatable elements that everyone knows and has used before, this approach works fine.

But when it comes to developing a new solution to a problem—one that's never been done before, where there's no blueprint, you don't know who needs to be involved, and it's hard to

project costs—those tools and techniques simply aren't adequate.

So, when project managers apply their standard tools and techniques to a complex business problem, they're rarely advancing the work.

Instead, to create new solutions across organizational functions, leaders need training on collaborative leadership skills and tools.

What Collaboration Looks Like

Because we haven't armed our leaders with the necessary collaborative tools, methods and skills, we've created another problem—very few understand what collaboration is supposed to look like.

They often think they're collaborating when they're really defaulting to directive leadership *because that's all they know*.

Typically, a project manager owns a project, does the planning, and solves the problem with some input.

Most of the time, these assigned tasks are unrealistic because the leader has no idea what other commitments those team members already have on other projects, not to mention their "regular jobs."

Collaboration engages everyone on the team in planning from the beginning. Collaboration also allows team members to make

commitments to deliverables, based on their existing workload and on the priorities of the organization. Participants contribute their ideas and reach consensus on what is best for the project, for the team. This process ultimately creates buy-in and ownership of the project deliverables from each team member, and this is what engagement looks like.

Collaborative Project Leadership Training

Every leader in your organization can benefit from collaborative project leadership training. When applied, this set of tools and techniques provides the best opportunity for success.

Without them, it's like trying to play football without a game plan. Imagine a coach who gets the players together and says, "How should we play this game? We're supposed to score more points than the other team and, to do that, we have to score more touchdowns. Now, everyone go out, and do what you think needs to be done to win."

What are the chances that the team will win?

Collaborative project leadership helps you develop a game plan for winning and establishes a process for revisiting that plan, based on how the game progresses. When you want to train leaders and teams in project management, make sure that the training teaches a collaborative approach—one that uses collaborative tools and methods, not the old directive ones.

By training more individuals across the organization in collaborative project leadership, you create a new standard that enables team members to move freely between projects and focus on the real work—producing deliverables and getting stuff done.

So, the minute you find yourself in the position of accidental project leader, find a collaborative engagement process from the get-go.

When you do, others will take notice and want to take part.

Posted in Project Leadership

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