

# Ethics Necessary for Project Success

Ethical Lapses Tainted Flint Water and Sank the Titanic

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I have concluded that ethical behavior is required for project success; more than a nice-to-have, but absolutely required. My conclusion stems from decades of managing projects in organizations where the outcomes depended not just on me, but also on myriad other team members, sponsors, customers, and stakeholders. My conclusion stems from considerable study of the leading contributors to project success, and it stems from a lifelong interest in the subject of ethics; I am currently serving as the Chair of the Ethics Member Advisory Group for the Project Management Institute. My thinking is that a successful project requires leadership, which requires followers, which requires trust, which requires ethical behavior. Therefore, an absence of ethical behavior undermines project success.

## **The Leadership Component**

Let's jump into the middle of that line of progressive thought to the leadership component. Since most projects are structured as some form of a matrix where the project manager has less formal positional authority than responsibility, success will come down in large measure to the project manager's ability to lead. In matrix environments, followers and, for that matter, stakeholders in general, have numerous choices for how they spend their time. Indeed, multiple projects may simultaneously be competing for their time. At the end of the day, followers gravitate toward leadership. Jeffrey Pinto, in his best-selling *Leadership Skills for Project Managers* book of almost twenty years ago, stated that "the best scheduling techniques, risk management, scope development, project control, and resource provisions will not ensure project success in the face of poor project leadership." I am delighted that this observation is currently reflected in the PMI Talent Triangle, where leadership receives equal prominence with technical project management, and with strategic and business management.

## **It is All About Trust**

*The Leadership Challenge* written by Kouzes and Posner, which continues to be a bestseller after four editions and twenty years in print, is the gold standard for research-based leadership and is the premier resource on becoming a leader. The text informs us that leadership requires trust. "It's clear that if people anywhere are to willingly follow someone - whether it be into battle or into the boardroom, the front office or the front lines - they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust."

It is an absence of trust in leadership that is making headlines regarding the tainted water crisis currently unfolding in Flint, Michigan. In that horrible situation, we learned that citizens have been drinking water tainted with poisonous levels of lead, and we learned that they were given false assurances about their water quality by many of the very officials entrusted with responsibility for water safety. Corrective action was not taken until a persistent university professor and his independent team of scientists tested the water and sounded the alarm. The loss of leadership trust by the residents of Flint was so great that some of them took to the streets in protest. "You want our trust?? We want Va Tech!!!" was hand lettered on one of the signs, together with the letters "PSI" circled in red with a line through it. The sign was protesting the business the city wanted to hire to test the water and referring instead to the independent university professor who sounded the alarm, whom they trusted.

Additionally, it was just over one hundred years ago when the *Titanic* sank in the North Atlantic Ocean after colliding with an iceberg. History informs us that, like the current water disaster in Flint, an absence of leadership trust was at the heart of the *Titanic* water disaster. One of the *Titanic*'s passengers noticed a mariner filling a bucket with tap water and asked why he was doing that. The mariner explained that he was supposed to take the seawater's temperature to assess the likelihood of it freezing into icebergs; since the rope was not long enough to reach the sea, he was filling the bucket with the only water to which he had access! The ice detection test was worthless. This mariner could communicate what he was doing and why to the passenger, yet he didn't think he could tell his senior officers because he feared a reprimand; no trust.

### **Ethical Values**

In both the Flint situation today and the *Titanic* situation from a century ago, trust was lost because the leaders compromised values. They did not do what was right. In the Flint situation, the value of honesty was compromised; citizens were misled and lied to about the water quality. In the *Titanic* situation, the values of responsibility and respect were compromised; the crew lost respect for a Captain who had been undercutting crew and passenger safety, and the crew shunned their responsibility to perform meaningful ice detection tests.

These values, responsibility, respect, and honesty, together with the value of fairness, constitute the heart of the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. It is interesting to note that the current version of PMI's Code is now celebrating its tenth anniversary and to note that the amount of ethics-related content on the PMI website has recently expanded ten-fold.

The way I see it, ethical behavior builds trust with the broad and diverse set of people upon which the project is dependent for success. That accumulated trust serves as the basis for effective leadership and project success in an environment characterized by limitation of authority.



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