

Proven Business Leader Actions for Project Success

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As a business leader, you are challenged by working in an environment these days where your business success is strongly tied to the success of the projects within your business. You are challenged with the need to actively contribute to the success of the projects within your business. Ultimately, the question for you is how? How can you act for project success? This topic has resonated strongly with the thousands of project managers and business leaders who I have had the pleasure of addressing directly and with the even greater numbers of people who have reacted to articles I have written about this topic in business and project management publications.

The good news for you as a business leader is that you can take proven actions for project success, and by doing so, raise your odds of business success. In this paper you will:

- Understand why your business success is now more dependent on project success
- Learn what proven actions you can take for project success
- Recognize the barriers to your actions
- Realize how to employ familiar management approaches to overcome the barriers

Business Leader Impact

Projects matter. Projects deliver benefits to customers and to the business. Projects enable the business to accomplish its strategic goals. Projects enable the business leader to succeed. But projects often fail. So businesses fail. So too, do business leaders.

Who cares? Both senior business leadership and project managers. That's who. One of the reasons that this topic seems to get so much traction is the convergence of mutual interests between the business leaders who are working toward implementing their strategic vision and the extraordinary focus given by project managers toward delivering results. In a June 1999 Fortune Magazine article¹ it was reported that the number one reason for business leader failure was "...bad execution. As simple as that: not getting things done, being indecisive, not delivering on commitments..." I believe that it is those business leaders today who are working to avoid his type of failure who have recognized and embraced their dependency on project management. You, as a business leader, are in an environment where more and more work is being conducted as projects and where more and more employees are using project management. According to the Project Management Institute, the leading project management professional organization in the world, the number of members and credential holders has doubled in just the past few years to

¹ Fortune Magazine article titled "Why CEO's Fail" published June 21, 1999.

over 420,000 people worldwide in 70 countries. The logic seems inescapable to me, you as a business leader are being measured by your ability to deliver business results – and since project management is almost entirely about delivering results – your needs are well served – dependent even – on project success. Execution matters; to your business and to you.

Just as your success is increasingly dependent on the outcome of projects, project success has become increasingly dependant on you the business leader. This is where significant opportunities for business leader action exist. Not just exist – but also are desperately needed. According to a survey of managers² conducted by and Budget and the Government, more than managers who responded they receive inadequate leaders. A broader by Towers Perrin³ revealed that three-quarters of the employees surveyed “said that their organizations or senior management don’t do enough to help them fully engage and contribute to their companies’ success.”

**Project Success =
Business Success**

federal government program the Office of Management Council for Excellence in 80% of the program to the survey reported that support from their business worldwide survey conducted

Project managers have found that project success over the years has become more difficult⁴ to achieve. Projects are more complex, their scope has broadened, and even the very definition of success has expanded. In the early days of project management, success was measured predominately in technical terms. It worked – or it didn’t. Today, project success has many more dimensions; cost, schedule, customer satisfaction, impact on other projects, impact on business, as well as technical. This changed nature of projects has caused project managers to become more dependant on their business leaders for project success.

Project managers are looking hard for your business leader support; and in most places they are not finding it. They are chomping at the bit for business leader action. This is a terrific opportunity for the business leader to step forward and separate themselves from the crowd. This is a terrific opportunity for business leaders to take action.

Business Leader Actions

These actions are intended for:

- Business leaders who have responsibility for organizations that depend on projects and on project managers.

² Council for Excellence in Government report titled “Delivering Program Results” published in December 2008 Volume 37 Issue 4 of The Public Manager.

³ “Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study” published October 22, 2007.

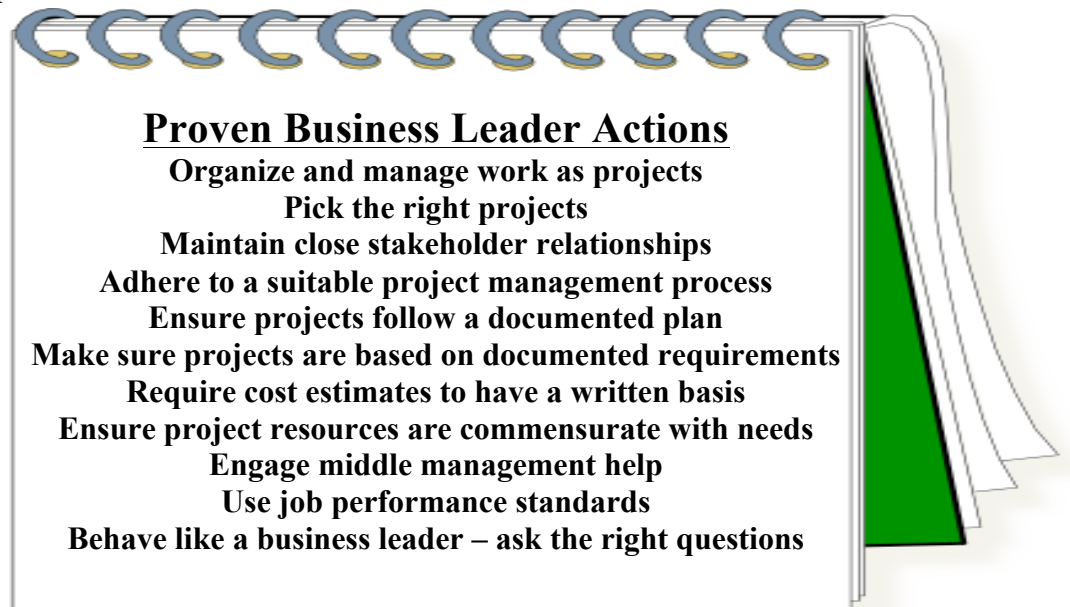
⁴ The PMI Network magazine article titled “In Command” published February 2006 reviewed the best of congress paper by Michael O’Brochta titled “Getting Executives to Act for Project Success.”

- Business leaders who are motivated to identify and overcome the barriers to project success.
- Business leaders who understand the strong relationship between project success and the success of their strategic business objectives; not to mention their own personal success.
- Business leaders who want more impact on their organization.

This is a good news story. The business leader actions for project success are largely known and understood. They have been proven to work.

Project management practitioners have been engaged for quite some time in identifying the actions that they would like their business leaders to take for project success. I am including a list of proven business leader

actions for project success that you can readily adapt. This list has stood the test of time. It was initially developed based on my own experiences in project management dealing with thousands of CIA project managers and with business leaders at the Central Intelligence Agency, and also based on some excellent writings about this topic that have been published⁵ during the past decade.



Organize And Manage Work As Projects / Pick The Right Projects

At the top of the list of business leader actions are **organizing the work into projects** and then **picking the right projects**. Project managers can feel like fish out of water when they work in an environment that does not organize and manage work as projects. Much effort can be spent trying to convince and educate the myriad stakeholders about the merits of project basics, such as requirements definition, baselines, schedules, and configuration control. This unproductive and often frustrating time by the project manager could be better spent if the department or section of the organization organized itself to be project based and if it were separated from the ongoing

⁵ See for example the second edition of the book by Graham and Englund titled “Creating an Environment for Successful Projects” published in 2004 by John Wiley and Sons and the book by Blomquist and Muller titled “Middle Managers in Program and Project Portfolio Management: Practices, Roles and Responsibilities” published in 2006 by the Project Management Institute.

and repetitive operations. Project managers can easily drown when they have too many projects to work on. Picking the right projects can be as sophisticated as strategic portfolio management or as simple as doing only those projects for which the project managers and project teams have the capacity to do. The field of Organizational Project Management, which is in its infancy, is squarely focused on picking the right projects. Organizations are already deriving considerable benefit from OPM approaches and for those organizations with sufficient maturity to employ OPM it should be given first consideration. For organizations with limited maturity or limited interest in OPM I favor the simple approach: you can have project managers do only as many projects as can be done well; don't agonize over the decisions about which projects to do. Actual research into the optimum number of projects for a project manager to manage successfully is sparse; however, the few works that I have come across do coincide with empirical evidence. Fewer projects are better; fewer projects mean more time spent per project. Fewer projects mean that ultimately more projects conclude successfully. I think that this is worth emphasizing. If you reduce the overall number of projects, you will likely find that at the end of the year, a greater number of projects have succeeded.

Maintain Close Stakeholder Relationships

Business leaders have a unique responsibility to develop and **maintain close stakeholder and customer relationships** that complement and enhance the relationships formed by the project manager. The time invariably comes when an issue, concern, or decision needs to be addressed by someone other than the project manager. Project funding, priority, and requirements are often topics that benefit from this type of supportive intervention. Note that these business leader relationships should be conducted so that the project manager's authority and responsibility are maintained and so that the project manager is kept in the loop and well informed. Ideally, it is the project manager who is serving up the topics for the business leader to act on.

Adhere To A Suitable Project Management Process

Project management is a discipline and as such benefits by **adhering to a suitable project management process**. You can and should see that a suitable process is followed. Project managers who are at the top of their game have come to rely on business leaders to **establish a standardized process** for their organization to use. They seek to be held accountable for applying tailored versions of this process to each of their projects, and they rely on others to do the same. They can, in the absence of your action, develop and follow their own processes, but they recognize the limits in efficiency and effectiveness of doing so. Wouldn't you rather have the project managers managing their projects instead of perpetually reinventing a process each time a new project rolls around?

Ensure Projects Follow A Documented Plan / Requirements

Project managers expect business leaders to ensure that they **follow a documented project plan** and to ensure that **projects are based on documented requirements**. They expect you to give them adequate time up front during the initial project phase to build these baseline documents and to be isolated from pressure to proceed hastily without them; they also expect you to hold

them accountable for continuous, controlled revisions to these documents through the project life cycle.

Require Cost Estimates To Have A Written Basis / Ensure Enough Resources

To help with the understanding of these baseline documents, you should require cost estimates to have a **written definitive basis**. In return for managing their projects according to plan, project managers look to their business leaders to ensure that **project resources (time, people, and money) are commensurate with needs**. If shortages and/or changes occur, the business leader should expect to receive an impact assessment from the project manager that has been developed in an environment without excessive pressure to absorb the change or simplistically, do more with less. This impact assessment, which could serve as the basis for plan revisions, will be formulated with respect to the plans, requirements, and other documents that have been baselined.

Engage Middle Management Help / Use Job Performance Standards

Actions by you need to be taken to **engage middle management help** and to establish and **use job definitions and performance standards**. By holding middle managers responsible for supporting project managers and by insuring that career progression and growth is aligned with best practice project management you will create long lasting and sustainable project-based cultures.

Behave Like A Business Leader – Ask The Right Questions

Business Leader Questions

What can I do to help?

What are the requirements?

What is the plan?

What is the status compared to the plan?

What are the top risks and mitigation strategy?

How do the stakeholders and customers feel?

What is the basis?

How do you know?

You can demonstrate your commitment to this culture by behaving like a business leader and **asking the right questions** of your project managers. You can acknowledge that your role as a business leader is enhanced when you **behave like a servant leader** in a role supportive of the project manager. In this culture you will attract, retain and grow project management excellence.

Here is a list of the right questions to ask; it is an absolute favorite of the business leaders with whom I consult. One business leader actually had this list reduced in size and laminated; so he could wear it around his neck attached behind his employee badge, so he could glance casually at it when he found himself in a meeting with project managers. This list helped him to behave like a business leader and ask the right questions. It will help you minimize the traditional distractions of getting into the project details, of solving the project issues, or of doing the project managers jobs for them. The list is my own; like the list of business leader actions, it has evolved over time. At this point it has become stable; I do occasionally add or subtract from it. At the top of the list is the extraordinarily effective question for the business leader to ask, “What can I do to help?” This supportive and

effective approach to management has been increasingly popular since “servant leadership” came into use to describe the executive’s role⁶ and continues to be regarded by the Harvard Business Review and others as the basis for “leaders should be led by the group’s needs” modern management theory.

Tailor The List

You can, and in fact should, readily adapt the list of business leader actions to suit your specific needs in your specific organization. And given the pent up interest project managers have in this topic, who better to turn to for help adapting this list than the project managers themselves? I recommend that you reach out to a few selected project managers and have them adapt the list.

Who you pick to adapt the list of what will become actions that you are responsible for is an important decision. Ideally, you will identify a few project managers who have demonstrated an interest in and an aptitude for maturing not only the efforts within the scope of their projects, but in that of the organization as well. I recommend picking individuals who understand and are skilled at managing projects, who have encountered limitations in achieving project success, and who already recognize their dependence on the business leader to overcome these limitations. Ideally, you will pick project managers who understand your genuine interest in faithfully carrying out some of the actions on the list.

Busting Business Leader Barriers

One of the first barriers to recognize is that you likely **cannot accomplish all of the actions** on the list. Even those business leaders predisposed to action will find that their circumstances and pressures of their jobs contribute to the situation where acting for project success can be difficult at best.

Volume Of Work / Organizational Maturity Level

The **volume of work** – important work – that is already the domain of the business leader is significant. Adding to it from a list of actions for project success can **overwhelm the available time and resources**. Additionally, the very organization that you are working in, will itself impose limitations on what can be done. Your organization is performing at a **certain level of maturity**; it has limits on what it is capable of accomplishing even if the time and resources were available. For the business leader where the organizational maturity tends to be characterized by heroics, ad-hoc activity, and a lack of formal processes, selecting but an item or two from the list of proven business leader actions for project success should be all that is attempted. By contrast, business leaders who work in organizations with well-defined repeatable processes that are undergoing continuous improvement have the latitude to undertake a greater

⁶ The book titled “Servant Leadership” was written by Robert Greenleaf and first published by Paulist Press in 1977 and has since been followed by many other publications including the “Harvard Business Review on Breakthrough Leadership” by Michael Useem in 2006.

number of items from the list. You can and should dive a little deeper into the important topic of organizational maturity. You can recognize the strategic and long-term nature of the actions on the list and understand that if you pick a limited number of them to succeed at today, that you will have another opportunity tomorrow to chip away at some more of them. Patience is after all a virtue.

Change Readiness Level

Likewise, the **change readiness level** of your organization will limit the timing of your action taking. Organizations are at varying levels of change readiness. It does little good for you to push for a change if the individuals and/or the organization is not ready; in fact, it is counterproductive and “sours the well water” for future attempts at similar changes. High readiness levels are characterized by strong desires for change and readiness for it; a strong resistance to change characterizes low readiness levels. Moderate readiness levels are characterized by a desire for change but a lack of readiness. For example, if there were a merger yesterday, and if today there were a reorganization, then tomorrow would not be a good time for you to try to implement a substantial change to something as significant as the standard corporate product development lifecycle process. A more appropriate business leader action would be to grant approval for a single project to tailor the standard lifecycle in a way that benefits the project but does not broadly impact other projects and processes in the organization. Your business leader actions must conform to the change readiness level of the organization. By waiting until the time is right you will accomplish more than if you rush to take actions that the organization is not ready for.

Limitations In Authority

Appearing near the top of the list of barriers for many business leaders is **politics**. Also appearing near the top of the list are **limitations in authority**. You work in organizations where you have limits associated with what you can do. No surprise. Business leaders I have worked with have reported that both politics and authority limits represent leading sources of conflicting demands, serve as the source for creep in the scope of and shifting focus of projects in their domain, and are responsible for fluctuations in priority and resource availability.

Amplify Your Authority

The good news here is that you can **amplify your authority** to overcome many of the political and other limitations mentioned. The good news is that you are already likely familiar with, if not already employing, techniques to amplify your authority. I have observed that, when adapted, those familiar techniques can serve your needs in a project-based environment.

Practice Servant Leadership

One powerful approach of amplifying your authority is to **practice servant leadership**. We have already seen that this approach forms the cornerstone for behaving like a business leader asking the right questions. Remarkably, it also forms the foundation for amplifying authority. This

authority, referred to as power by some authors, can come from a number⁷ of sources. Although some of the sources of power are limited by circumstance that you can do little about, other sources can be amplified through the practice of servant leadership. You can build strong bonds and loyalty with others simply by taking interest in their professional well being. Helping them results in their vesting in you additional power. You can and should use this power, authority, to overcome some of the barriers to take proven actions for project success.

Communicate Effectively

Similarly, you can amplify your authority through **effective communication**. Although you, as well as practically every other forward leaning business leader, already understands the importance of communicating effectively. The real challenge is doing it. I have taken to relying on a study⁸ that addresses the differences between what we know we should do and what we actually act upon and do. This study examined how the top 2%, the strongest performers, the Alphas, differed from everyone else. This study surveyed over 5,000 project managers and their stakeholders, including their business leaders. I have found the study results compelling. While virtually all of the study participants knew the importance of effective communication, the Alphas did so twice as much and twice as effectively as the non-Alphas. Both groups worked under similar constraints, both groups had precious little extra time for added effort. Yet, somehow, the Alphas managed to communicate twice as much and twice as effectively. Remarkable.

Act Assuming Authority

Interestingly, similar results in the Alpha study were observed for the entire topic of authority. Alphas acted as if **they already had the necessary authority**. Again, they acted as if they had twice as much authority as the non-Alphas, when in fact, both groups had the same levels of authority. Alphas act as if they have the needed authority. Again, remarkable.

Form A Project Management Council

And now for the “silver bullet” approach to amplify authority. I have seen this work in virtually all situations, for business leaders with limited amounts of time, in organizations with differing maturity levels, in organizations with differing change readiness levels, and with differing political environments. I would like to advise you to consider **forming a Project Management Council**. It can be key to amplifying your authority and key to acting on that authority. It can aid you in forming the list of proven business leader actions for project success and it can be a resource you draw upon in carrying out those actions. Since these actions will transform your business you should see that they are managed as a business transformation project. Using a Project Management Council is a favorite approach of mine and many others have successfully

⁷ Social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven, in a now classic 1959 study titled “The Bases of Social Power”, developed a schema of five categories of power: positional, referent, expert, reward, and coercive.

⁸ The book titled “Alpha Project Managers: What the Top 2% know That Everyone Else Does Not” was written by Andy Crowe and published in 2006 by Velociteach.

used it⁹ during the past decade. Referred to variously as a project support office, project management working group, project management office, strategic project office, project management center of excellence, and project management community of practice, these are organizations formed explicitly for the purpose of focusing on **how project management is/can/should be practiced** within the organization. My ideal project management council is comprised entirely of motivated project managers who have volunteered for the assignment. They are experienced, visionary change agents. As thought leaders they know how project management is done and how it should be done. They care deeply about their chosen profession and are concerned with the well being of other project managers. I view a Project Management Council as a link between the business leader and the project managers and vice-versa. Sizing it to no more than about a dozen people, having it chaired and/or sanctioned by a business leader, and limiting its authority will help it gain recognition for the good it can do and help it counter many of the stereotypical negatives associated with groups of this type that exist outside the formal organization chart. Having it focus broadly on the entire organizational system as it relates to projects and project management raises its bona fides. Having it make recommendations to business leaders and provide help with implementing the proven business leader actions for project success positions it to have enduring value. Precluding it from control over decisions and resources minimizes the possibility that it will be viewed as a threat to established organizational decision-making mechanisms. Limiting the term of its members to a year or possibly two will insure a constant flow of fresh perspectives and ideas.

A Final Word

I have presented what I feel is a good news story to you the business leader. Together we have examined the **critical dependency between business leader success and project success** and have observed that the **actions available to the business leader to raise the odds of project success are well understood**. I have listed proven business leader actions for project success and encouraged you to adapt the list by seeking out the advice of project managers. We have recognized that barriers exist for the business leader interested in taking these actions and we have recognized that approaches already familiar to the business leader can be employed to bust the barriers. I have focused on the approaches that **will amplify your power to take action** and I have given emphasis to servant leadership. I have strongly encouraged you to form a Project Management Council not only to help you form the action list but to help you implement them as well. Together, you the business leader and the project managers, will likely find that success in both of your worlds is more likely than ever.

⁹ Dr. Brian Hobbs addresses the status of project management councils and similarly named practices in his 2007 white paper for the Project Management Institute titled “The Multi-Project PMO: A Global Analysis of the Current State of Practice.”