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PROJECT LEADERSHIP AND THE ART OF MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS

Successful project management in today's business environment is increasingly complex. Effective management of the intricate "people" side is the glue that holds together a project of any caliber.

By Barbara Anderson

A tremendous amount of information and resources are available to today's project manager. Much has been written and documented about the craft and complexity of effective project management. If you conduct a search at a book retailer, you'll discover more than 2,500 publications on the subject.

There is so much information, in fact, that the Project Management Institute (PMI) was compelled to publish and update an internationally recognized global standard for the project management professional—*A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK)*. This publication is intended to document and standardize generally accepted project management information and practices. So why is it that with so much information and training available to project leaders do countless projects continue to fail?

The *PMBOK Guide* defines project management as the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements. It further defines the project manager as the person responsible for accomplishing the project objectives. While the tools and practices for achieving success in the interpersonal aspects of a project are not widely seen in project management training, many experts understand the importance.

PMI recognizes that the project manager and her team need interpersonal skills, in addition to the resources of the *PMBOK Guide* and other technical skills and awareness (for example, application of area knowledge, understanding the project environment, and general management skills). The recently updated *PMBOK Guide—Fourth Edition* includes the new appendix G on interpersonal skills.



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PROJECT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN

How effective is your leadership? Review the project leadership development plan below to determine areas to enhance in your own development.

Define the attributes of good leaders needed for effective project management:

- Which ones do you need to develop or enhance?

Assess and evaluate your project teams:

- Where are they on the team performance curve?
- What stage of development are they in?
- What can you do to enhance their development and nurture them to become a more effective team?

Assume that every member on your team has a specific motivational value system. Become more aware of the behaviors and strength deployments of your team members. Notice where and how they add value:

- What can you do to encourage them to add value and feel valued?

- What can you do to build more positive relationships and increase your level of influence with and between your stakeholders?

- Do you know your motivational value system?

- Have you taken the Strength Deployment Inventory?

Motivational value systems define our self-worth:

- What environment enhances your self-worth and that of the project team members?

Conflict management is essential to building relationships and creating effective project teams.

- What is important enough in your life to trigger conflict in you?
- What is important enough to others in your life that they are willing to go into conflict?

Document at least three activities that you are willing to accomplish in the next four weeks to invest in your leadership development.

Project success requires that project managers not only manage projects, but lead people. They must gain the knowledge, skills, tools, and experiences of other leaders to enable them to manage and lead both the technical and the people side of project management.

Understanding the soft side

Many experienced project managers will tell you that it is not the technical side of a project that causes project failure, but the people side, also known as the “soft side.” It is here where the concepts and processes of project management begin to come unglued in the heat and turbulence of real-life application.

Why is the soft stuff so difficult? If you think about it, most project management assets, tools, and techniques come with documentation, templates, and training to help apply an organization's intellectual capital and experience to projects. But isn't it the people who are the engines that drive a project to

successful completion? With the multitude of information about the technical side available, there is very little research and resources about the people side. Unlike engines, people don't come with an operations manual to help us lead them.

When I started managing projects more than 20 years ago, I was amazed at how much time was spent communicating with stakeholders. It consumed at least 80 percent of my time. Early on, I saw the necessity and importance of building and managing relationships both within the team as well as with those affected by the team's output. I will always remember that one particular project that was saved by developing and maintaining good relationships—this is what project leadership is about.

Taking one for the team

Teams are the vehicle through which a project's goals are accomplished, so special emphasis has to be placed

on understanding the dynamics of a team and how to be a good leader. In their book *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith defined a real team as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.” Katzenbach and Smith recognized that people must do more than just work together as a group. They must develop the skills to know how to work as an effective team that can achieve higher performance than other working groups.

Winning football teams have superstars, a playbook full of effective strategies, and the ability to maximize each individual's strengths while working in cohesion toward a common goal. It is the role of the coach (or for our purposes, the project leader) to identify and direct that talent to maximize the overall performance and effectiveness of the team as a whole.

The Wisdom of Teams addresses the value of developing a “real team” by using a performance curve (as presented in Figure 1) to show team performance and level of effectiveness plotted against other types of groups. The differences are in the leadership and interpersonal commitment both to the team’s goals and to each member of the group. The very rare “high-performing team” is one step above the “real team” and has the highest level of task accomplishment and interpersonal commitment of all.

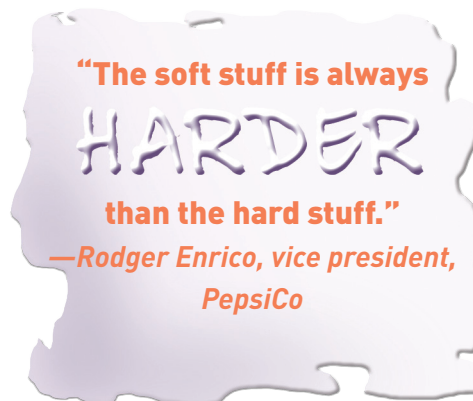
Bruce Tuckman’s model of team development contributes another set of research. It shows the natural stages of development within a team and the interpersonal interactions that influence task accomplishment and team morale. As a group moves through these stages, the leadership role of the project manager changes based on the evolving needs of the team. The project manager must encourage development along this path to attain the team’s highest level of performance. Again, the research shows that interpersonal skills are critical to team development, increased task accomplishment, and team morale.

Ken Blanchard’s, *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*, further cautions leaders that there is more than one style of leadership. The best style is always dependent on the followers’ needs. These needs are primarily focused on the development level of the followers; competencies and commitment are used as the variables to map and align the appropriate leadership approach with the readiness level of the individual and the team.

All of this research and much more form an invaluable body of knowledge for the project manager as leader. Still, project leaders must go beyond development, performance, competencies, and commitment levels. A project leader must understand the uniqueness of individuals on her team—their gifts, motivations, and values and how they are all interconnected to work toward the highest level of performance.

Until we appreciate these unique strengths, we cannot truly lead or

develop the most effective, high-performing teams. Our interpersonal skills can be enhanced through the research that exists on teams and interpersonal interactions. We must appreciate the differences of each human being’s motivations to use her gifts, talents, and strengths effectively and to understand her own value and that of a leader.



Getting interpersonal

People inherently feel better about themselves and are happiest when they feel valued and believe that their strengths are being used effectively. This is the belief at the heart of relationship awareness theory—a group of ideas developed by Elias H. Porter that help people improve relationships and manage conflict by providing a window into the motivation that drives behavior.

Relationship awareness fills the soft skill void in perfecting project management. It provides the additional knowledge that can help project leaders complement their knowledge of

the project and its environment, the natural development of teams, and the needs of individuals as they develop along a competency model. It gives meaning to observable behaviors in the context of the project environment by helping us to understand the motives behind the behavior.

Relationship awareness theory is built around the following four premises:

- **Premise 1:** Behavior is driven by motivation.
- **Premise 2:** Motivation changes in conflict.
- **Premise 3:** Personal weaknesses are overdone strengths.
- **Premise 4:** Personal filters influence perception.

We are all the same in that we *want* to feel good about ourselves, but we differ in *what* makes us feel good about ourselves. The four premises hold true in their understanding of the potential to achieve what makes us feel valued, and they help us to create an environment where others feel valued at the same time.

Fortunately, Porter didn’t stop at the theory level. He developed and validated an instrument for application called the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI). The results of the SDI assessment are the equivalent to an individual’s “user’s guide” or operations manual, and they provide project leaders and team members with invaluable insight into how to work effectively with others in the group and minimize the potential for conflict. (See Figure 2.)

The primary strengths of the motivational value systems (MVSs) shown in Figure 2 are needed to provide an

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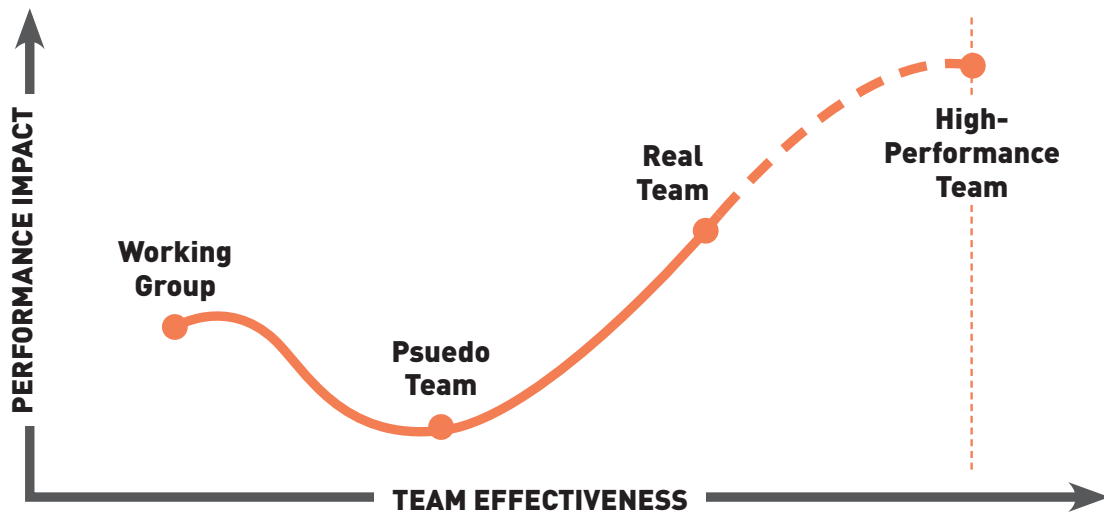
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Figure 1. The Team Performance Curve.



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environment that best meets the interpersonal needs of the team as a whole and to efficiently and effectively move the team up the performance curve, while valuing each team member. Since a project leader will have her own specific MVS with its associated strengths, she will need to borrow from other MVS strengths depending on what the team's situation and development stage requires. During the forming stage of team development the project leader needs to be self-confident and persuasive to direct or "tell" the team its

purpose and set project objectives

and help the team move from "forming" to "storming." These behaviors are the primary strengths of the assertive-directive MVS.

While other personality assessments are available, the SDI is the best choice in project and work environments because it is based on observable behaviors. In the chaotic environment of a project, leaders must act quickly. And given the pressure they are under from

so many stakeholders (sometimes hundreds), the decisions they make must be founded on something reliable.

The SDI allows team members to quickly validate their own behaviors and gain insight into the way they each experience and deal with conflict. Members of the group quickly learn to understand and respect the actions and strengths of others in a memorable, nonconfrontational way. Project leaders

"When a team outgrows individual performance and learns team confidence, excellence becomes a REALITY."
—Joe Paterno, Penn State Football Coach

gain a new level of confidence to address or prevent interpersonal problems.

More importantly, the SDI helps leaders to draw out better performance with less effort by treating people the way they want to be treated and in a way that makes them feel valued. The learning gained from the SDI provides a glimpse into what an individual cares about and considers valuable. This insight allows one to conceptualize the

ultimate "win-win"—enhanced self-worth for each individual and for the group as a whole.

Everyone who has been involved in projects knows that interpersonal conflict is inevitable and even valuable. We need conflict to build effective teams. In the storming stage of team development, it is the resolution of conflict situations that enables the team to advance to the next stage of development and increase performance.

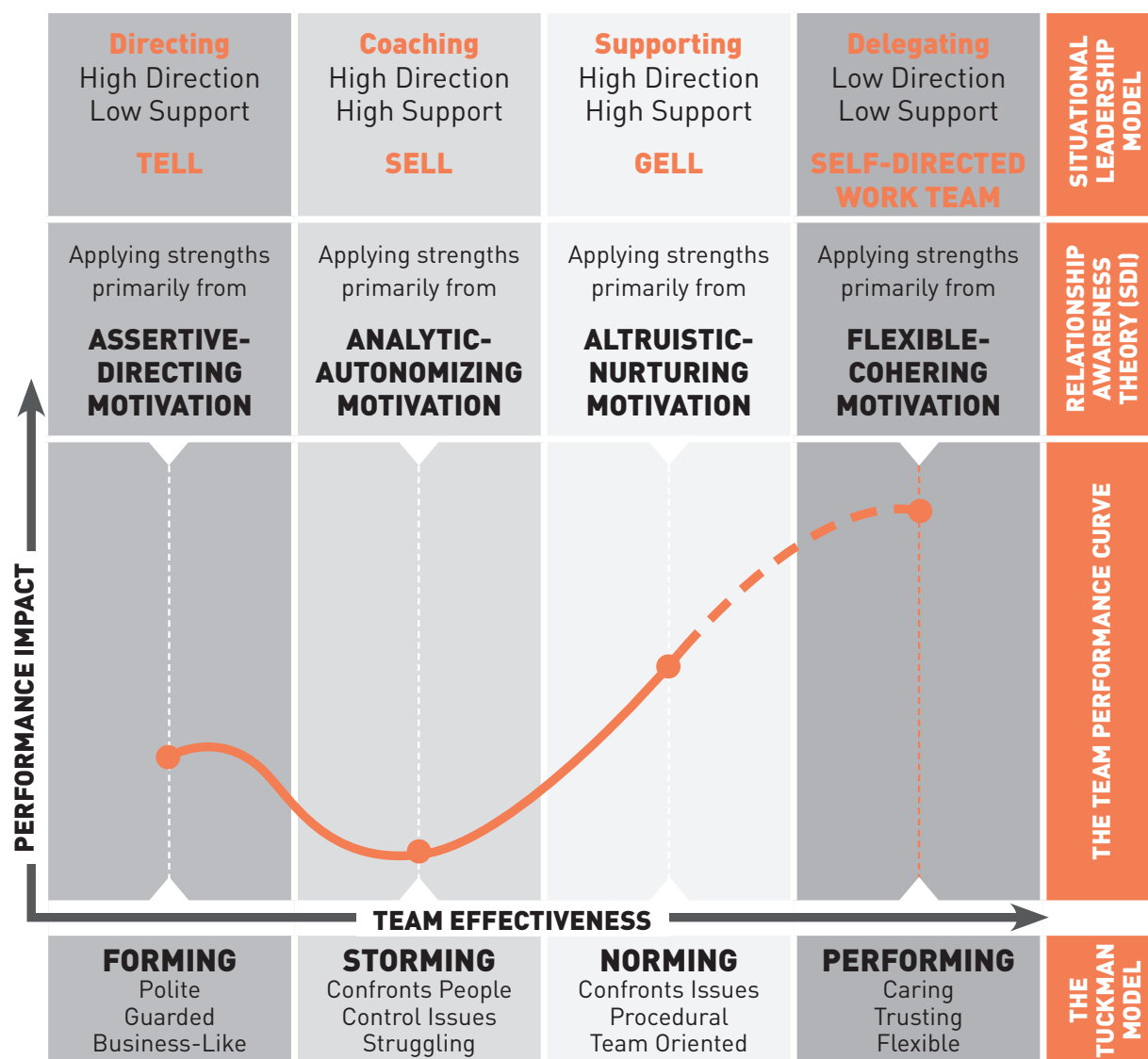
The ability to manage conflict is an important interpersonal skill, especially for project leaders. The SDI equips project participants with the ability to recognize the subtle signs of conflict or foresee potential conflict triggers for themselves and others.

Scoring points for performance

Research done by the Hay Group has shown that a team with good leadership will have significant performance advantages, often at margins double the size of teams with neutral or demotivating climates. The group's 40 years of research shows that a 28 percent variance in business success can be attributed to organizational climate and that 70 percent of organizational climate is attributed to leadership style.

If the SDI can improve the understanding of team members and enhance a project manager's ability to lead, not only will the project climate be improved, but the project team will

Figure 2. Alignment of Performance and Relationship Awareness.



Alignment of Blanchard's *Situational Leadership Model*, Tuckman's *Model of Team Development*, Smith and Katzenbach's *Team Performance Curve* and Porter's *Relationship Awareness Theory* with its four primary Motivational Value Systems (MVS) represented by the *Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI)*. The highest performance aligns with the point of highest interpersonal relationship among the team members. Adapted and Printed by permission of Harvard Business School Press. From *The Wisdom of Teams* by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith. Boston, MA 1994, pp 84. Copyright © 1993, 1999 by the Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, all rights reserved.

experience the positive side effects of a “real team” with higher performance, morale, and individual self-worth.

In my opinion, the SDI's true value comes from the fourth premise—the awareness that our own perceptions (often colored by our needs and wants of the moment) influence how we interpret and react to the behavior of others. In a relationship situation, if we are not getting what we want, we may see the other person's behavior as “in the way” or as outright opposition, and therefore see the behavior as negative or a weakness.

Alternately, if we perceive the behavior as helping to meet our needs, we may see the exact same behavior as a strength. Understanding that we all have the same need (to feel valued) helps us to see our role in building relationships by achieving value for ourselves and for others as we relate to them. It is through this value-building relationship that we accomplish effective team development, appreciate the needs of the team, and validate effective approaches to leadership styles.

For all the great techniques and concepts that aid in the efficient

accomplishment of a project, it is the maximizing of these soft skills that makes it all work in the real world. **T+D**

Barbara Anderson is an instructor, consultant, and project and program manager in IT. She is currently SDI Master Trainer and Account Relationship Manager for Personal Strengths North America; barbara@ps4sdi.com.

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