

Influencing- The Heart of Project Leadership

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Influencing is the ability to change the minds and decisions of others without necessarily having formal authority to do so. This capacity lies at the heart of project leadership.

What is common in all great men and women of influence who have ever lived, and those who are alive today? It is their extraordinary capacity for leadership, whether in the Political, corporate, or social context.

Project leadership is one of the most talked about and least understood subjects. This is mainly because there are many perspectives on the subject, with each view having some merit. Let us examine a few paradigms on leadership. David Ogilvy, founder of an advertising agency, Ogilvy and Mather, and himself a leader of some quality thought: "Great leaders almost always exude selfconfidence. They are never petty. They are never buck passers. They pick themselves up after defeat ... They do not suffer from the crippling need to be universally loved ... The great leaders I have known have been curiously complicated people."

This is not how a leading management guru, Warren Bennis, sees leadership. Bennis says, "Successful leaders follow an almost universal principle of management, as true for orchestra conductors, army generals, football coaches, and school superintendents, as for corporate executives."

Regardless of how leadership is viewed by scholars and practitioners, one thing is clear - leadership is all about people. It is about having the ability to get the best out of people in any given situation. To this end, influence is the very essence and soul of project leadership. How to influence, and be open to influences, is the key for effectiveness as a project leader. Influence is the universal project management principle Bennis seems to be referring to.

Influencing capability has little to do with formal authority or position. For example, Gandhi held no formal office yet had immense influence that finally led to the independence of India in 1947. He succeeded in his endeavors through the force of his intellect and character.

Those who care deeply about accomplishing important project goals depend on the skills of communicating, negotiating and networking. How do we achieve sway over people and events? How do we win over others to our way of thinking? Why do we listen to some and not to others? These are some of the questions that can guide your reflections on leadership and influence.

Positive thinking is no longer just a great idea for us. Inspiring project leaders have an aura around them, which if not seen by all, can be felt. Their mere presence on a project serves to instill faith in people who become receptive to their ideas, no matter how challenging or difficult they may appear at first. So, think positive. Desired actions and outcomes should follow in your projects.