

**Politics, Leadership, and the Art of Relating to Your Project Team**  
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**Abstract**

Project managers are required to do a variety of tasks requiring a plethora of technical and organizational skill. One skill vitally important to project success is the ability to understand the environment in which our project(s) exist. This ability refers to understanding our organization and its political climate, our project team, and our own leadership ability. Projects typically do not fail due to technical reasons. Rather, they fail due to a project manager's inattention to the political environment, unwillingness to respond to the environment with the appropriate leadership style, and inability to deal with difficult team and interpersonal issues.

These "soft" skills of project management are often times the most difficult to master - yet, they are vital to success. Every project manager needs to have a working knowledge of these topics to become a truly effective project leader. For these reasons, this topic is very relevant to today's project management community. In this paper, project managers can expect to learn and understand the political climate present on every project, identify ways to build honest and genuine relationships with their project team, and understand how to leverage leadership, team relationships, and politics to drive their projects to success.

**Politics in Project Management**

Organizations are living organisms. They have a personality, referred to as culture, within which several subcultures exist. These subcultures are often in direct competition with one another for much needed scarce resources. Effectively leading a project through these cultures and subcultures requires that project leaders have the ability to understand the motives and objectives of others within the organization. They must also be able to demonstrate the ability to influence those individuals and departments which can help propel their project to success. To enable this influence to take place, the project leader must have a firm grasp on the organizational culture and have a sufficient level of political savvy to navigate the environment.

**Politics Defined**

There have been various books devoted to organizational politics and their definitions have varied. However, in the context of this paper, politics is defined as *using influence and/or persuasion to affect the outcome of an event, decision, or strategic direction*. It's interesting to note that this influence may come from yourself or through the use of others.

As an example of using others to exert influence, consider this scenario. You have just been assigned to take over the management of a project in a different department. The project is approaching a critical milestone which must be met before moving to the next phase. Additionally, this milestone is required to be passed to allow funding to be released for project continuation. Failure to meet the milestone will result in project termination. For this phase of your project, very specific skills are required to enable the design completion of a key component required for the milestone. Few persons within the organization actually have the skills required by your project. There is, however, one person on your project team that has a long work history with the resource manager these people report to. It may be wise to leverage your project team member to help influence the project manager to allow one of his people to work on the project to allow the milestone to be achieved.

Project management isn't what it used to be. From who's on the team and where team members are located to the tasks they're expected to complete, project management is a changing discipline. Consider that project teams are increasingly dispersed across large areas, sometimes spanning the globe, and that team members are finding themselves in more partnerships with managed subcontractors and outsourcers (Brandel, 2006).

Politics in organizations have always existed. However, the organization of today is faced with more challenges than any period in history, driving the need for political acumen to be more important than ever. Technological

advances over the past several decades have led to global business becoming the rule rather than the exception. Simultaneously, several organizations have been forced to merge with competitors to survive. The need to increase efficiency in a global and fast-changing business environment has been a natural catalyst for the use of project management. As a result, the project manager must be able to effectively deal with the political tide of the organization and the stakeholder community.

### **Is Politics Positive or Negative?**

The answer to the above question is – yes, politicking can be both positive *and* negative. We typically use the term “playing politics” only to describe our colleagues behavior, never our own. *They* are sucking up, scheming, and manipulating, but *we* are building relationships, developing strategies, and opening communication channels (McIntyre, 2005, p. 3). This is an interesting observation because your view of politics may depend on which side you’re experiencing any given political scenario.

The bottom line is that projects are conducted in organizations by people. We must acknowledge and understand that politics are simply a fact of organizational life. Individuals, groups, and business units all use politics as a means of wielding influence to achieve their goals. In most organizations, project managers do not hold significant formal authority. In matrix organizations, for example, project managers use personnel assigned to them by resource managers. The resource managers are actually the ones performing the annual performance review and providing the salary increases. As a result, project managers must often use other than formal means to influence.

The danger with politics to the project manager lies in not being politically savvy. Without an inherent knowledge of organizational politics you may not become aware of someone trying to victimize you or your project until it’s too late. With a clear understanding of the agendas of others and the associated organizational political climate, you may be able to see and, perhaps, even anticipate a political assault on your project. This may help to employ countermeasures to avoid negative project implications. Let’s explore the positive and negative use of politics and look at a few examples of both in project management.

#### **Positive Politics**

When politics are used to advance the goals of your project and/or your organization, they’re being used constructively and can become a means of impacting positive change. Some examples of using politics in a positive way are (Reardon, 2005, p. 86):

- *Creating a positive impression* – assuring that key people find you interesting and approachable
- *Positioning* – being in the right place at the right time to advance your project
- *Cultivating mentors* – locating experienced advisors
- *Lining up the ducks* – making strategic visits to peers, senior people, and support staff at which you mention your project and accomplishments and let them know what you can do for them
- *Developing your favor bank* – favors usually require reciprocation; by agree to – or even offering – favors, you are making “deposits” in anticipation that someday, when you need to call in a chit, you will have the currency to do so.

It’s important to note there’s a theme to recognize in the bulleted list above. You are helping others while, at the same time, cultivating a network that can be leveraged as your ally in potential times of crises. Project managers frequently need to negotiate for personnel and financial resources to achieve successful project delivery. Having a key ally that is able to wield formal authority on your project’s behalf is exactly the type of political play which must occur to drive your project to success.

#### **Negative Politics**

When we discuss the use of organizational politics, we are most often referring to their destructive use. Far too often, politics are used as a means of advancing an individual’s own agenda. This will usually occur at the expense

of other individuals, groups, or one's own organization. Some examples of using organizational politics in a genuinely negative manner include (Reardon, 2005, p. 87):

- *Poisoning the well* – fabricating negative information about others, dropping defaming information into conversation and meetings in the hope of ruining the target's career chances
- *Faking left while going right* – leading others to believe you will take one action in order to increase the likelihood of succeeding via an entirely different maneuver; allowing or encouraging someone to think one condition exists when in reality another condition holds
- *Deception* – lying, for whatever reason
- *Entrapment* – steering or manipulating someone into a political position or action that results in embarrassment, failure, discipline, or job loss.

While the positive use of politics will advance your project or your organization, if it does this at the expense of others, it becomes negative politics. We each play politics, in one form or another, every day. It's because the positive use of politics often goes unnoticed that we often refer to the negative when we think about organizational and project politics. As project leaders, it's our job to ensure we're acting with others in mind when we act to advance our projects and organizations.

## **Leadership**

Voluminous research and scores of books have been written on the topic of leadership. Everything from what it is, how it can be learned and practiced, and even the lessons of business icons have all been explored. The tact of this paper is slightly different. We'll be examining leadership from the project management point-of-view. Many first-time project managers find themselves in a project leadership role as a result of project management being the next logical step in their career progression. In large part due to this, many project managers have been unprepared to manage a project from start to finish. They had to learn both project management and leadership skills by attending the school of "hard knocks" and learning from their mistakes. Thankfully, project management is fast becoming a recognized career path. Let's look at a few of the attributes required to lead projects in today's project environment.

### **Project Leadership and Courage**

There are three critical aspects to leadership in project management. First, you must be internally-motivated and driven, i.e. – Capable of self-leadership. Second, you must have the ability to lead others. Third, and critical to personal and project success, is your ability shape the context of your project (Strider, 2002, p.1). The first point is obvious. You must be self-motivated given the high pressure placed on project managers to perform. The second and third points are the crux of where politics occur in project management. It's when you're dealing with others that you'll face your most difficult political and leadership challenges.

To say that project management in today's complex business environment is difficult would be an understatement. In fact, we're leading projects that are some of the most complex and challenging in history. At different points throughout their careers, project managers will be faced with decisions which will be overwhelmingly difficult. It's at these times, when things get difficult, which define truly courageous leadership. Some of the most difficult challenges will be standing up to authority figures in defense of your project, your team, and/or yourself. Very few project managers have not had to put their career on the line on at least one occasion. If they haven't, they simply haven't encountered the situation yet. For example, telling executive-level management bad news is never a savory task but it must be done. Another example would be confronting a non-responsive (or invisible) project sponsor for help and support.

### **The Political Side of Leadership**

For many people, politics and leadership are on opposite sides of the spectrum (Pinto, 1996, p. 119). We typically hold our leaders as noble and place them on pedestals. Alternatively, we often view our politicians as masters of deception. As project leaders, we are the ones who must be out in front steering our projects through the

organizational political landscape. We must change our view of politics if we are to do this. It is our obligation to develop and utilize political acumen to:

- Keep our projects focused and on track,
- Avoid the political landmines which we will undoubtedly face on our projects, and
- Shield our teams from the negative political play of other individuals and groups to allow them to stay focused on their work.

## **Leadership Styles and the Team Lifecycle**

As a project progresses from inception and moves through to completion, your leadership style as a project manager should progress also. Leadership in project management is situational. One leadership style does not fit every occasion. At times we need to act as drill sergeant, coach, mentor, counselor, and facilitator. There are still other occasions when we need to function as referee and umpire. The ability to adapt your leadership style to fit the situation will serve you well throughout your project and your career. Let's now examine the probable team leadership styles required with respect to the team lifecycle (forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning).

### **Forming**

In the first stages of team building, the forming of the team takes place. The team meets and learns about the opportunity and challenges, and agrees on goals and begins to tackle the tasks. Team members tend to behave quite independently during this stage. They may be motivated but are usually relatively uninformed of the issues and objectives of the team. Team members are usually on their best behavior but very focused on self. Mature team members begin to model appropriate behavior even at this early phase (Tuckman, 1965). Based on this description, leaders should focus on providing a facilitative leadership style which will encourage individuals to gel into a cohesive team in the early stages of team development.

### **Storming**

Every group will enter the storming stage in which different ideas compete for consideration. The team addresses issues such as what problems they are really supposed to solve, how they will function independently and together and what leadership model they will accept. Team members open out to each other and confront each other's ideas and perspectives.

In some cases storming can be resolved quickly. In others, the team never leaves this stage. The maturity of some team members usually determines whether the team will ever move out of this stage. Immature team members will begin acting out to demonstrate how much they know and convince others that their ideas are correct. Some team members will focus on minutiae to evade real issues.

The storming stage is necessary to the growth of the team. It can be contentious, unpleasant and even painful to members of the team who are averse to conflict. Tolerance of each team member and their differences needs to be emphasized. Without tolerance and patience the team will fail. This phase can become destructive to the team and will lower motivation if allowed to get out of control. Leadership during the storming phase should focus on mining actively for conflict so it can be resolved quickly to move on to the next phase (Tuckman, 1965).

### **Norming**

At some point, the team may enter the norming stage. Team members adjust their behavior to each other as they develop work habits that make teamwork seem more natural and fluid. Team members often work through this stage by agreeing on rules, values, professional behavior, shared methods, working tools and even taboos. During this phase, team members begin to trust each other. Motivation increases as the team gets more acquainted with the project.

Teams in this phase may lose their creativity if the norming behaviors become too strong and begin to stifle healthy dissent and the team begins to exhibit groupthink. Leading during this phase should be participative more than in the earlier stages. The team members can be expected to take more responsibility for making decisions and for their professional behavior (Tuckman, 1965).

### Performing

Some teams will reach the performing stage. These high-performing teams are able to function as a unit as they find ways to get the job done smoothly and effectively without inappropriate conflict or the need for external supervision. Team members have become interdependent. By this time they are motivated and knowledgeable. The team members are now competent, autonomous and able to handle the decision-making process without supervision. Dissent is expected and allowed as long as it is channeled through means acceptable to the team.

Team leadership during this phase should almost always be participative. The team will make most of the necessary decisions. Even the most high-performing teams will revert to earlier stages in certain circumstances. Many long-standing teams will go through these cycles many times as they react to changing circumstances. For example, a change in leadership may cause the team to revert to storming as the new people challenge the existing norms and dynamics of the team (Tuckman, 1965).

### Adjourning

This phase involves completing the task and breaking up the team. Others call it the phase for mourning. A team that lasts may transcend to a transforming phase of achievement. Transformational management can produce major changes in performance through synergy and is considered to be more far-reaching than transactional management (Tuckman, 1965). During the adjourning phase, focus your leadership style on emphasizing the importance of the team relationship that has been built over the course of the project. When project teams adjourn there will be a host of emotions that will be felt by the individual team members, from sadness to elation and everything in between. This is the time that the relationships and connections you've built over the course of the project lifecycle will truly pay dividends.

## **Relating to Your Project Team**

Being able to direct your team in a constructive and creative manner requires that you have the ability to relate to them on an individual and group level. Simply directing tasks is not a sufficient level of leadership in today's business environment where the competition for talent is fierce. But, how do we begin to relate to our project teams and make this personal connection with them? There are many things we can do to create a personal connection. First, learn about them as individuals. What do they like to do on their time off? What are the names of their children? Where are they from? Inquiring to find the answers to these questions can really help create a personal connection. Let's examine two other factors critical to relating to your project team in more detail – empathizing with their struggles and being an approachable project leader.

### **Empathy and Your Team's Struggles**

One considerably effective way of connecting with anyone is by being able to empathize with their daily struggles. Hold discussions with individuals on the team daily to discover the issues and problems they face. You don't need to hold discussions with every team member every day, but try to hold a discussion with at least one team member each day so you can build a rapport with them. Some of the best project managers are humble individuals able to view themselves on the same plane as those above, below, or beside them within the organizational hierarchy. Simply put, they relate to everyone associated with the project as being equals as individuals who simply have different roles to play on the project.

## Approachability

Are you approachable? Have you ever thought about it? Being an approachable project manager who is able to maintain cool emotions is a vital attribute of a project manager. If your team cannot approach you for fear of retribution, being yelled at, or being interrogated you will not hold the credibility and trust necessary for your team to feel safe in bringing bad project news to light while there's still time to take corrective action. You may find out eventually, but it may be too late to take any action to correct the project's path to failure. The key message to remember when thinking about approachability is – *care, don't scare!*

## Implications – Putting it All Together

As project managers, we will spend the majority of our time at work trying to lead our projects and project teams to a successful outcome to the benefit of all stakeholders. Being proficient in the hard skills of scheduling, cost management, and risk management is critical to effective project management. However, politics and leadership are the art that allows these skills to be put into practice. Therefore, being proficient in both the technical “hard” skills and interpersonal “soft” skills is requisite to today's project manager.

As stated previously, practicing successful project management is much more than simply delivering a project within budget and on schedule. We can meet the triple constraint of on time, on budget, and with sufficient quality and still deliver a failed project. Simply meeting these constraints are no longer enough. Projects must meet these constraints but also meet stakeholder expectations – without damaging relationships or meeting the constraints at the expense of others. Here are some suggestions to help you understand what you can do to lead your projects and project team through the sometimes turbulent waters of organizational politics (Pinto, 1996, pg. 145-150):

1. *Acknowledge the political environment of the project and organization* – It's impossible to perform effective politics if their simple existence is denied. The use of politics is a natural part of human interaction in the advancement of personal and group goals.
2. *Understand and acknowledge the importance of conflict on projects* – Avoidance of conflict is a natural tendency. However, we must embrace it if we are to be successful project managers. By their very nature, projects upset the natural order and challenge the status quo. This fact alone is enough to guarantee conflict, but projects also include the interaction of many individuals encompassing diverse backgrounds, ideas, and experiences. This should encourage us to embrace conflict because this conflict forces us to hear and consider differing viewpoints.
3. *Learn how to influence and persuade* – Understand that there will usually be an individual tendency to favor departmental loyalty over project and organizational interests. By understanding this we can move much more quickly toward advancing our projects by finding the intersection between what's in the best interest of our projects and the interest of other departments. We can then work to influence and persuade others to move toward that intersection.

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