

**Self Directed Leadership Development – Moving beyond the PMP  
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Bob, the sponsor, was dismayed to hear rumours his project was losing momentum; he had no idea what had gone wrong. With funding achieved, charter and project plan complete, and the PMO engaged, Bob was left thinking, “This project *has* to be successful - my career is riding on it”. He had received no indication from Mary, a seasoned PMP working on his project that things were going poorly; he had assumed her reports told “the real story”. But then again, they had never really discussed anything at length. After debriefing team members, Bob got a picture of an overextended, burnt out, frustrated and ineffective project manager. Bob remedies this situation. Walking out of Bob’s office in tears after finding out she is being replaced, Mary asks herself, “How did this happen? Where am I heading? What do I really want to be?”

As a project sponsor, Bob knows that effective project leadership is critical, not only for him but also for his company. Bob must compete for project resources, and must be especially on the lookout for strong leaders. He knows that a good project leader can determine the eventual success or failure of his project, and therefore needs to find someone who can attract other project talent, rally a team around a vision, motivate and inspire commitment, work through conflicts, and give straightforward, honest evaluations. These leadership skills are becoming more important every single day as organizations become more adept at managing project portfolios, aligning tactical plans with strategic goals, and take on more strategic (enterprise) projects. Today’s project landscape is highly globalized, and organizations need authentic leaders who can tear down silos and cut through communication barriers that slow reaction time. Leadership skills have traditionally been valued at the executive level, but the need to inspire a team toward a vision and execute a strategy precisely is becoming increasingly critical at the tactical, and even the project level. Organizational changes are bigger and happen faster than ever, often by means of a project. Projects are executed by people. And successful project executors are leaders.

Our own personal, individual attitudes and behaviours have a profound effect on us as leaders. An **attitude**, or “a position or manner indicative of feeling, opinion, or intention toward a person or thing” is directed inward. Attitudes help form and shape our outward **behaviours**, which are “how one conducts oneself, acts or operates”.

As project managers, every single day we are required to adjust our behaviours to adapt to diverse, complex social environments. However, like everyone else, we have our own ingrained attitudes that influence our behaviours, either positively or negatively. In order to become better leaders, we must be ready to confront our own internal ideas, preconceptions, and thinking patterns.

As PMI focuses on fulfilling its mission that “worldwide, organizations will embrace, value and utilize project management and attribute their success to it”, developing new methods for training, certifying and developing project managers into project leaders who can strategically execute enterprise projects will be a crucial component.



Today, most training programs including PMI REP programs are aimed at the neocortex, the part of the brain which is traditionally associated with learning and thinking. Teaching the neocortex is appropriate, if the desired achievement is memorization of facts or passing the PMP test. However, if the goal is to transform a project manager from the inside to develop him into a project leader, learning must occur in the limbic portion of the brain, which is traditionally associated with emotions. (Coleman et al. 2004, p. 102-103)

Researchers, such as Annie McKee, have taught us that the limbic part of the brain learns more slowly, requiring more commitment and persistence, since it is centred on habits and patterns ingrained early in life. The cortex learns faster, but does not retain information for as long. New neural tissue can be generated in adulthood by training the limbic portion of the brain, which leads to permanent changes in how a person thinks, acts, and reacts. This stands against the popular belief that some people are simply born leaders. Anyone can be developed into a successful leader. Becoming a positive and effective leader requires this sort of training, which turn old destructive behavioural habits into powerful positive ones. (Coleman et al. 2004, p. 103)

Continuous practice and repetition are essential to training the limbic brain. Unlike the cortex, this part of the brain cannot learn a new pattern in the course of a seminar or talk. While these help jump-start the process by giving ideas and starting points, rerouting the way our attitudes influence our behaviours will only happen with conscious repetition and evaluative feedback. In order to bring the project management profession to the next level, we must find the courage to go beyond the foundation of knowledge, experience, and tactical skills to focus on the emotional and behavioural aspects of leadership.

Since these leadership skills cannot be learned strictly through traditional training methods, effort will have to be put into developing experiences (rather than courses) that will involve coaching, assessments, and “safe” communities in which to practice a leadership repertoire.

Achieving success in training and education has always been somewhat driven by the individual participant. In this new paradigm, success will be almost exclusively determined by the individual rather than the trainer or the material. This new paradigm is Self Directed Leadership Development, and is modelled after Richard Boyatzis’ Intentional Change Theory.

Self-directed leadership requires three commitments from a project manager:

- Convictions
- Purpose
- Courage

Without these three elements, you have no direction and no reason for change. Trying to change your behavioural patterns without these will only leave you frustrated, lost and confused.

Everyone has his or her own personal convictions about what is important in life. But for the project manager seeking to become a project leader, there are three mandatory convictions. The first is that he must be fully *convinced* that personal competencies (attitudes and behaviours) are critical to Project Management career success. Secondly, Project Managers must be completely *committed* to the project management profession and to developing personal competencies. Thirdly, Project Managers must be completely *open* to feedback on personal competencies, including feedback that is painful to receive.



Convictions are hard to hold onto without a purpose. A Project Manager must be determined to find a creative force. After all, stripped of other qualifiers, projects are fundamentally the *creation* of products and services. Therefore, as project managers, we are creators, and must have a reason and a purpose to inspire our creation. Finding a purpose makes work meaningful, and if something is meaningful to you, the more likely it can be for your team. Projects managers who have a purpose love their work, and their enthusiasm affects everyone they work with. Work with a purpose affects lives in a meaningful way.

Courage is what allows people to pursue changes and shapes attitudes toward risk. It takes courage to persevere when everything is going wrong. It takes courage to be completely honest with yourself. And it takes courage to be a servant.

Self-directed leadership development is the process by which an individual, inspired by personal convictions and a purpose, develops and then carries out a plan to improve his leadership skills and personal competencies. This plan must be the individual's own, not something produced by a corporate training department, human resource organization, boss, or coach.

A great starting point for any intentional change initiative is Boyatzis's Intentional Change Theory. This theory outlines a basic five-step approach to self-directed learning. His five steps are as follows:

1. Define your ideal self. Ask, "Who do I want to be?"
2. Define who you are right now – your real self. Ask, "Who am I?" Objectively assess your strengths and weaknesses.
3. Build a learning agenda. The plan must be yours, and tailored to you as a unique person. It should concentrate on building up your strengths.
4. Practice your new leadership skills. This includes experimenting with new behaviours, thoughts and feelings in a safe environment.
5. Develop trust-based relationships that help, support and encourage each step in the process. You need other people to help you discover your strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, this step will be happening concurrently with the others throughout the entire leadership development process.

The level of personal involvement required by each of these steps makes clear why having defined convictions, a purpose, and courage are so important to a successful leadership development process. Intentional Change Theory is meant to guide a journey; these steps cannot be accomplished in a classroom. (Coleman et al. 2004, p. 109-112)

It is important to remember that each of us learns in a different way. This experience must be adapted to your learning style. Forcing anyone to learn by a method that feels unnatural to him can cause great frustration.

This Intentional Change Theory is a continual process, one that evolves and grows. All steps can be occurring simultaneously as one grows more aware of his true need for self-fulfilment, learns more about what makes him tick, adjusts to new seasons in life, and quietly listens to what really matters to him.



Project managers stand to gain in many ways from self-directed learning and intentional change initiatives. Taking control of your profession and determining your own future as a project manager makes sense given the volatile, high-pressured, diverse project environment in which we work. Because the self-directed leadership development model is so individualized, its general structure is very basic. There is no litany of steps to remember or mounds of book-knowledge to memorize. A project manager's guide to leadership development can be outlined in four basic steps.

**Project managers must establish direction and commitment in their profession.** Being true to yourself, establishing convictions about the benefits of self-knowledge and self-improvement, and what you really aspire to be are critical to making a break-through in your project management career. Before you begin the journey, you must know where it is that you want to go.

A subset of establishing direction and commitment is motivation. People learn what they want to learn, and in a self-directed learning process, you will learn absolutely nothing that you do know want to.

**Acquire leadership behaviours and learn to assess them.** Since projects are run by people, the ability to build and sustain trust-based relationships with others is a critical first step and an important leadership behaviour to master. If you can earn others' trust, other leadership behaviours will begin to fall into place. Trust-based relationships allow seasoned project managers to build upon their solid foundation of project management knowledge and subject matter expertise to become a true source of guidance for a project team.

Trust-based relationships resonate positive energy throughout the entire project team, going far deeper than the usual purely rational business relationships. Benefits of trust-based relationships include: (Maister et al. 2000, p. 203)

- Being asked for advice
- Having your recommendations followed
- Respect
- Forgiveness for mistakes
- Being involved earlier on in the project

The trust of your stakeholders must be earned, and earning trust is not simply a matter of what you know, or what you have done before. Rather, important behaviours are required to quickly establish these relationships in today's demanding project environment. These behaviours require self-awareness, feedback and continual practice until they become second nature. Trust-based relationships can be broken down into components so as to be more easily understood and practiced.

Trust-based relationships are built when a project manager expresses knowledge in a credible manner, consistently demonstrates a pattern of acting reliability, (linking intentions to actions) and shows a willingness, tempered by prudence, to develop deeper relationships with stakeholders that go beyond pure business and deepen the commitment each have to help the other succeed. To achieve these results, a project manager must make their stakeholders, including team members' priorities, their highest priorities. In a diverse environment, one routine does not work for everyone; self-awareness and awareness of others' behavioural styles, others'



strengths and unique talents are crucial to adapting your behaviours to those around you in order to consistently develop trust-based relationships. By combining intimacy and low self-orientation with reliability and credibility, and adapting the strength of each to a person's behavioural style, a project manager can quickly built trust.

**Practice your leadership repertoire.** Leadership is best defined as, “the use of influence to direct the activities of others toward the accomplishment of some objective”. (Ward, 81) Trust-based relationships provide a safe environment in which to practice leadership techniques.

Project managers often find that they are given full accountability for project outcome, but very limited, if any, actual authority. They are basically asked to **lead without express authority**. Fortunately, this is possible. When stakeholders trust you, they are more willing to listen to your advice; hence you are more able to lead them without express authority. Once you have learned how to build trust-based relationships with stakeholders, you can lead them through **consultative leadership**, or by acting as if you are working them, which you are!

Achieving results with these leadership techniques leads to increased job satisfaction. Humans are by nature social creatures, and as such we all have a basic desire to help and serve others. Helping others achieve their goals, which align to group goals, is tremendously rewarding. Project Managers have nothing to lose and everything to gain from becoming authentic trusted project advisors to their stakeholders, customers, and team members.

One of the challenges that face the self-directed leadership development process is how to monitor and record progress. Unlike project management knowledge, personal competencies cannot be measured simply by a multiple choice test. Measurement tools must also be separated from traditional political reward feedback systems and performance evaluations. In today's project environment, project managers must be able to demonstrate and measure versatility and adaptability.

Good examples of feedback tools are online multi-rater observed behavioural assessments, followed by a comprehensive debriefing and coaching session. This process can provide valuable insight to a project manager's behaviours. This type of assessment makes you both more self-aware and more aware of the people around you, thereby giving you the tools with which to construct more productive relationships.

A 360-degree review can stimulate leadership development of a project manager by clarifying areas where growth is needed. With proper coaching and support systems this type of review can accelerate performance development and encourage project managers to develop themselves into project leaders.

**Serve your community.** Life-changing learning begins when the student becomes the teacher. Studies have indicated that people learn best by teaching. By giving back to the profession, mentoring and learning through others, project managers can become project advisors and experience a meaningful profession with higher self-actualization.

Service to others is a common denominator to meaningful work. Through servant leadership, we can fulfil our inherent desire to put the needs of others first. Project leadership is more than directing and aligning people. It is finding out what makes them unique, what their individual



skills and strengths are, and helping them to develop themselves into better, wiser and more capable citizens. Project managers are called to be “citizens of service” to their project team, customer, stakeholders and communities.

Servant leaders use expert and referent power, plus a conscious effort to delegate power to customers, sponsors, and most importantly team members through trust-based relationships and the ability to be an authentic advisor. Deferring authority and relinquishing control take courage on the part of the project manager, but if trust-based relationships are in place, the result is greater commitment on the part of team members, since they have more ownership of the work. This is not a blind relinquishing of control, but rather a final step to becoming a true project leader.

With the globalization of resource teams, the demand for highly adaptable and self-motivated workers, project leaders will continue to be highly sought after for their “people skills”. As project management increasingly becomes the engine that executes strategic change, organizations will focus more on these “people skills”, and measure success not just by schedule, cost and quality but also by how stakeholders experience projects.

### ***Model for certification***

As for the future, we should strongly consider adding professional criteria for ongoing certification requirements for PMP’s or add a higher level of PMP certification, such as APL (Authentic Project Leader). The criteria should be focused on advancing the profession, increasing the value of service and creating future leaders for organizations. Requirements for achieving the higher level of certification would include participation in a self-directed leadership plan. There would be three components that would be measured and recorded.

1. Developing and pursuing a purpose or mission
2. Continual use of assessments and objective feedback tools on attitudes and behaviours
3. Providing service to a community

### **Developing and Pursuing a Mission**

The PMP® would have to define his personal mission for his project management career. He would be required to submit long-term goals answering questions such as:

1. Why am I a project manager?
2. What do I want to be remembered for?
3. What do I want to change about my project management profession?

### **Continual assessments and feedback**

This step would involve participation in feedback mechanisms and/or coaching sessions that are independent of traditional job performance reviews. These feedback mechanisms would be complementary to traditional performance appraisals, but would go into more detail regarding how the individual’s project management leadership activities are being received.

### **Serving Your Community**

Leadership experience requires commitment to service of others’ interests without expectations of any payback, beyond the scope of PMI. This step would involve logging service hours, especially those linked to the personal mission statement. Individuals could perform service through work



for a non-profit organization, church, their community, or anywhere they wish to take an active leadership role.

What about Mary?

Bob was celebrating with Mary over drinks with the project team and CEO. Elated about the success of this project, Bob discussed using it as a model for future strategic initiatives and related to Mary and the CEO how effective this team had been in driving desperately needed lasting change into the organization. Both Bob and the CEO talked to Mary about what she thought were the critical success factors, and inquired about her future career plans. When they asked her what she really wants to be doing 5-10 years from now, Mary confidently responded.

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