

Successful Project Management in a Low Authority Environment

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Abstract

A frequent complaint by project managers is that they do not have the authority to do their job. Project managers are expected to elicit top performance from all members of the project team, often in an environment of high responsibility and low authority, coupled with the use of borrowed resources in a matrix organizational structure. This paper will explain how to strengthen your ability to effectively work with project teams and other stakeholders to achieve project success without formal authority. This paper will explore the difference between a leader and manager, the sources of power available to all project managers, the role of emotional intelligence, and how personality styles impact the application of leadership and management. Also covered in this paper are suggested methods for getting results and dealing with conflict in an environment of low authority.

Leaders versus Managers

Let's start out by clarifying the difference between a leader and a manager. A **leader** is someone who influences and inspires people. A leader will motivate, bring out the best in others, and get people to work together to achieve a common goal. A **manager** is a person who is responsible for directing and controlling the work of others. A manager will organize, control, balance priorities and make sure the work gets done. Developing and championing a new idea is leadership, while implementing the idea is management. A quote that nicely summarizes the difference between managers and leaders is "managers do things right while leaders do the right things" (Hitt, 1998, p. 5.).

So are leadership or management skills more important to be a successful project manager, or are they equally important? The projects undertaken by a company or organization should align with the corporate vision and strategy, which is typically determined by middle and top management. This level of management also decides on the projects that will be done to support the strategic plans. Note that project managers are responsible for getting these projects successfully done by directing and controlling the work of others. Key responsibilities for project managers include organizing, coordinating, resolving issues and conflicts, and communicating. These descriptors are all about *managing* the project. You will frequently see in the job description for a project manager a statement about "leading the project team." However, the reality is that most of what project managers do is simply not leadership. While having a project manager who is a good leader is highly desirable, the manager function is more critical

in order to successfully implement the project. The project team may look at the sponsor, some other key executive, or even a respected team member as the person providing the leadership. This isn't something that gets listed in the role and responsibilities for a project, but the project manager should consider for a project whether the team sees her/him as a leader; or if that will come from another source. Don't take this as a personal insult since leadership is situational.

The Role of Power

The dictionary defines power as the capacity to do something, and includes the control and influence over other people and their actions. In a notable study of power conducted by social psychologists John French and Bertam Raven in 1959, power was divided into five separate and distinct forms: coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, and expert (MindTools, ¶1-5). Although the French and Raven list is frequently cited, listed below is a composite list more specific to the different types of power that are relevant to project managers (Changing Minds, ¶1, 2, 4-8):

1. **Positional Authority** – This covers the power people have from being in defined positions. Positional authority refers to the specific powers given to a person based on their position in an organization, such as president of a country, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company, or a general in the military. Your supervisor may be another example since this person often has the ability to make decisions that impact you such as raises, promotions, and work assignments. It's important to note that not all positions, despite their formal title, have an accompanying amount of significant power. For example, the Vice-President of the United States has a very high position, but very little actual power. In some companies, your supervisor may decide on your raise, while in other companies the supervisor makes a recommendation, but it's the next level up that has the authority to make the final decision. In some organizations, a project manager may be given specific positional authority, such as signing contracts, approving invoices, and negotiating change orders with a client, while in others this power may be retained by upper management.
2. **Knowledge** – This power can be either technical or social. Technical knowledge can include such things as knowing how to prepare a schedule using specific software, or knowing the technical details of a financial software package being purchased for your project. Knowledge can also be socially related, such as being an expert on the use of social media or having specialized training in communications or team building.
3. **Skill** – This power, which is closely related to knowledge, is the ability to *do* something rather than just know it. For example, having extensive knowledge of team building will not help a project manager unless that person has the skill to use this knowledge when working with a project team.
4. **Obligation** – If a person feels obligated to you, this is a source of power. A sense of obligation can be created when you do a favor for someone and that

person feels a duty to repay that favor. People also can feel obligated to follow rules (such as project team roles and responsibilities), or they can feel a responsibility to meet a commitment they made. You can build this type of power by the favors you do, by the help you give people, and by building a sense of team commitment.

5. **Trust** – The definition of trust is confidence in and reliance on your good qualities, especially fairness, truth, honor, or ability (MSN Encarta). The trust of others has to be earned by your actions over time; this is done by consistently showing integrity and respect for others. People develop confidence and belief in you and what you can do based on your actions; this in turn gives you the power to ask for things without them wondering whether you may take advantage of them or have ulterior motives.
6. **Self-Determination** – You decide what you say and do. You decide on your actions. You can show initiative and challenge the status-quo, or go along with established procedures, no matter how irrelevant they may seem. For example, let's look at the case of a project manager with plans to contract the development of a new software application for his company. He wanted to use a cost reimbursable contract with a not-to-exceed cap and a cost incentive for finishing below a target price. This project manager was told by the buyer handling professional services the contract type he described was not an option – he could use a fixed price or cost reimbursable contract which were the company standards. The project manager could have simply capitulated and follow the guidelines, but instead he got corporate purchasing and his management involved and argued his case – and won.
7. **Emotional Intelligence** – In addition to the power sources listed above, project managers looking to be really effective in a low authority environment have another tool at their disposal: emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and manage your own emotions and to effectively deal with the emotions of other people. In the article, *What Makes a Leader*, Daniel Goleman (author of the best seller *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*) makes the point that there is a direct link between a company's success and the emotional intelligence of its leaders (Goleman, 1998, p. 94). In fact, he states that EI is twice as important as technical skill and IQ for job success!

Positional Power

A frequent comment often heard from project managers is “if only I had more power.” The belief is that with this additional power the various project problems would all just go away. Many people relate effective management and leadership with having positional power which gives them authority. However, consider *The Office*, a popular American comedy television series that aired from 2005 to 2013, with Michael Scott as the regional manager of the Scranton branch of the Dunder-Mifflin Paper Company. For people who watched this show, it is very obvious that while Michael has positional

authority in his role as regional manager, he is not recognized by most of his employees as either a leader or as an effective manager.

The upshot is that having positional authority alone does not make a person either a good leader or manager. A frequent complaint by project managers is that they don't control the project resources, and team members get pulled for production emergencies or other work. The belief is that having authority over the project resources would solve the problem. But consider this: do most project managers really want to act as supervisors for team members, and conduct performance appraisals, address career planning, and handle the many personnel issues that come up? It would be a major distraction and reduce the amount of time the project manager can focus on the project. In addition, if a production emergency does occur within the company that requires one or more of your project resources, are you really going to put your project above the greater immediate needs of the company? The answer is probably not if you have any career aspirations.

Another interesting point about positional power is reflected in a confidential survey conducted of project managers and resource managers at a large corporation. The simple question asked was regarding the balance of power, and whether the project managers or resource managers had more power (refer to Exhibit 1). The results were surprising – the resource managers felt that the project managers had more power, yet the project managers felt that the resource managers had more power. This result occurred for two reasons. The first was a lack of clearly defined responsibilities. The second was that many people just assume that they don't have power; they forget about their power of self-determination. Sometimes it's better to take the initiative and assume you have the authority and responsibility to make decisions. Remember the saying that it's often easier to ask forgiveness than it is to seek permission.

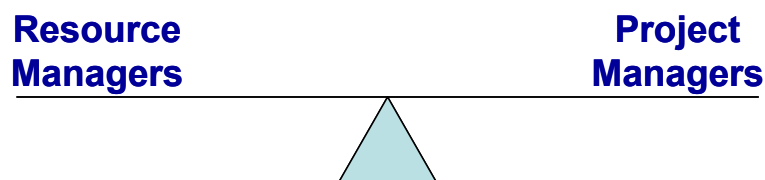


Exhibit 1: The Balance of Power

The comment by project managers about having more power also doesn't really get at the root cause of their dissatisfaction. When interviewing project managers regarding what specific powers they really need to be more effective, what most often is revealed is really a need for more support from their management. Unfortunately, many middle and upper managers will express support for project management, but their actions don't demonstrate that support. A perfect example of this is a large corporation where project planning was done by the book and a project budget of \$55 million was determined. The client manager insisted that the project should only cost \$48 million, based on no specific expertise except his "expert" opinion. The project organization management provided no support to the project manager and he was told by his

management to “make it work.” Unfortunately, they neglected to give him a magic wand or a bag of potions. There were no scope reductions – the client wouldn’t entertain any suggestion of that – and the project ended up at \$54 million and the project manager was removed from the company due to the project “failure”. Obviously the management in this company really didn’t support project management.

In the past, corporations used to focus on positional power and authority. What is becoming more common is a shift from power based on formal authority to other types of power such as knowledge, skills, trust, obligation, self-determination and emotional intelligence. Project managers need to stop using lack of authority as an excuse for project problems since in reality they can draw on these other sources of power. The ability to innovate, create, apply new knowledge, and build trust should occur at all levels of the organization, but especially on the front line where project managers are working to successfully deliver projects. However, these other sources of power are not bestowed on a project manager; they have to be *developed* by the individual.

The Power of Emotional Intelligence

An often overlooked source of power is emotional intelligence. According to Daniel Goleman, there are five components that make up emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (Goleman, 1998, p. 95). As with other managerial skills, EI can be learned. Critical to developing your EI is having a good knowledge of personality styles. The better you understand personality styles (both your own and others), and the better you are at adapting your personality style to that of others, the more successful you will be as a project manager in your dealings with project team members and other stakeholders.

There are numerous personality theories, but most are based on the four quadrant behavioral model, with behavior mapped along two axes. While each personality theory has its own specific vocabulary, the horizontal axis is usually labeled **Introvert** versus **Extrovert**, and the vertical axis is labeled **Feelers** versus **Thinkers**.

Introverts are typically described as being less assertive, quieter, more reflective, and in no rush to make decisions. In contrast, extroverts are more assertive, more talkative, louder, and quicker to make decisions. Feelers are typically described as being more responsive to others, more playful, and more focused on feelings. In contrast, thinkers are described as being less responsive to others, more serious/reserved, and more focused on facts. The intersection of these axes forms four quadrants, each of which represents a personality “type” (refer to Exhibit 2.) Again, each theory uses its own vocabulary; however, the labels **Analytical**, **Amiable**, **Driver**, and **Expressive** serve well to define the four basic personality styles. While everyone is likely to have a dominant type or style, that style is augmented by a mixture of the other personality types and their traits are also dependent on environment and circumstance. Also, no one personality style is best; each can be successful, and each has its merits as well as its drawbacks.

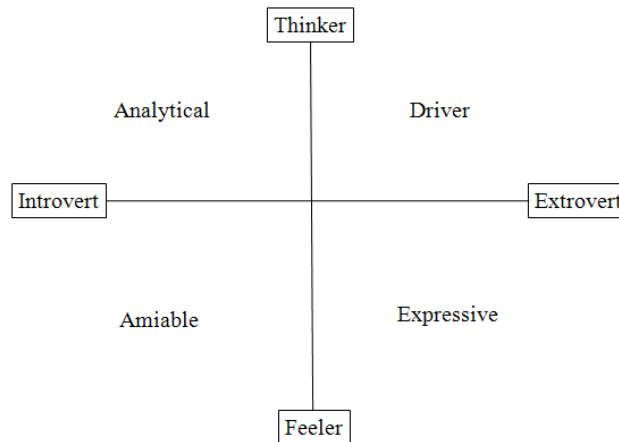


Exhibit 2: The 4-Quadrant Personality Model

Unfortunately, most project managers ignore personality styles when dealing with project stakeholders. Yet understanding personality models is of direct help in achieving personal awareness and adaptability; it can help you recognize behavior patterns in others – and yourself. It can be a source of power. Learning about personality and realizing that people have different styles is the first step in improving your emotional intelligence. The second step is becoming aware of *your* style, including strengths, weaknesses and how you react to stress. The third step is learning to identify and work effectively with the personality styles of other people. The more you understand about your own personality and that of other people, the better able you are to realize how others perceive you, and how they react to your personality style. The fourth step is learning how to flex your style to improve the way you work and communicate with others on a project. Mastering these four steps will improve your emotional intelligence and make you a more effective project manager. Improving your emotional intelligence will provide you with more “power” to use on your projects. For more information on personality styles, see *Pardon Me – Your Personality Is Showing* (Lukas, 2009, p. 1-7).

Getting Results with Limited Authority

The earlier discussion on power has hopefully helped you realize that positional authority alone won’t get results. A project manager with high emotional intelligence including knowledge of personality styles, coupled with knowledge, skills, trust and self-determination is a person with power who can consistently deliver successful projects.

A key component for getting results when you have limited authority is use of personality styles, especially the ability to “flex your style.” This means you do what is appropriate in a communication situation with another person by temporarily using some behaviors typical of your non-dominant styles. It does not mean abandoning your dominant style, but it does require that you be well aware of not only your style strengths but also your style weaknesses as well as the style of the other person. It requires using body language effectively and matching your wording to the preference

of the person you are communicating with. Learning to flex your style is especially important when the other person is stressed, something important is at stake, you need to get off on the right foot in a new setting, or you are operating with limited positional authority. Your ability to adapt or bring into play different style traits in response to different situations and needs is one of the most powerful capabilities that a project manager can possess.

Resolving Conflicts with Limited Authority

Conflict management is inevitable on projects. Conflicts can arise due to organizational issues such as work priorities, sharing of project resources and responsibility for decisions. They can also occur within the project team over scope, technical solutions, schedule, costs, risks, and communications, or because of different personality styles, goals, and values.

Unfortunately, many project managers are uncomfortable with conflict and tend to shy away from it, hoping that the situation will somehow get resolved without their intervention. However, project managers with high emotional intelligence realize conflict can be beneficial as long as it is promptly managed and used to drive better project performance. Successful conflict management can help resolve issues, lead to creative problem solving and innovation, improve communication and understanding between team members, and strengthen team relationships.

The five common conflict resolution techniques are shown in Exhibit 3 below. This section of the paper will briefly discuss the use of these techniques in a low authority environment, along with how the personality style of a project manager can tend to make particular techniques easier or harder to use.

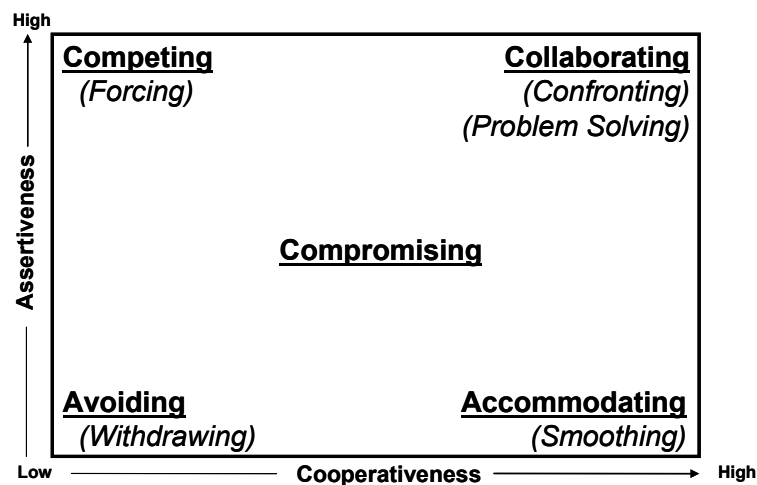


Exhibit 3: The Five Common Conflict Resolution Techniques

Each conflict resolution technique shown in Exhibit 3 represents a different combination of two dimensions:

- **Assertiveness:** the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns.
- **Cooperativeness:** the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy another person's concerns.

Competing

Competing is forcing resolution of the conflict with the solution you want. Forcing resolution of a conflict is appropriate when quick and decisive action is needed, or on important issues where an unpopular course of action must be implemented. It does help to have positional authority with this conflict resolution technique, or the other party in the conflict may challenge whether you really have the decision-making power.

Drivers find this conflict resolution technique very easy to use since this personality style likes domineering and overcoming opposition to accomplish results. However, in most situations competing is not an effective conflict resolution technique since it can alienate team members who don't agree with your point of view.

Avoiding

Avoiding is not pursuing your own or the other side's concerns, so the conflict goes unresolved. This conflict resolution technique is appropriate when the issue is trivial, you have no chance of winning, people need to calm down, or others can resolve the issue more effectively. Obviously avoiding does not require any positional authority since with this technique you are trying to evade the issue.

The analytical style in particular finds this conflict resolution technique easy to use since it eliminates the need to deal with the feelings of other people. However, it should be noted that avoiding does not resolve the underlying conflict.

Accommodating

Accommodating is resolving the concerns of the other side to their satisfaction while leaving your concerns unresolved. In a nutshell, it's giving in to the other side in order to resolve the conflict. With this conflict resolution technique, the need for positional authority is very low, unless you need to give the other side something that requires authority (such as paying for overtime work). Accommodating is useful when the issue is very important to the other person and not important to you, or to demonstrate that you are open-minded, or when you know you are wrong.

The amiable personality style finds this conflict resolution technique easy to use since they focus on people, seek sincere appreciation, avoid rejection, and take difficulties personally. The expressive personality style also would find this technique easy since they also focus on people and seek popularity. However, giving in can result in the project manager being viewed as ineffectual by people within the organization and/or team.

Compromising

Compromising looks to find a solution that satisfies some concerns of both parties. With this conflict resolution technique, the need for positional authority is also very low, unless you need to give the other side something that requires authority. Use of compromise is appropriate when both sides are strongly committed to mutually exclusive positions or when a quick agreement is needed.

Drivers enjoy this conflict resolution technique since they see the compromise negotiations as a competition – one they fully expect to win. The expressive personality style also like compromises since it provides the focus on people and the recognition when the compromise is finally reached.

Collaborating

Collaborating looks to find a solution that satisfies the concerns of both sides in the conflict. With this conflict resolution technique, the need for positional authority is very low since both sides are working together to find that one common, acceptable solution. This technique does take more time, but provides a final resolution of the conflict. Collaboration is useful when gaining commitment on the resolution is important, for resolving interpersonal conflicts, and when the participants bring different perspectives to the issue.

The analytical personality style likes this technique because of the data and facts used to resolve the conflict. The amiable likes this technique because of the people interactions and taking time to find the right solution. The expressive and driver personality styles can also work this technique very effectively, but may get frustrated with the amount of time needed to bring resolution to the conflict.

Note that with the five conflict resolution techniques, only forcing really requires a high amount of positional authority. The other conflict resolution techniques require little or no positional authority. What this means is that project managers have lots of methods for resolving conflicts that do not require a high amount of positional authority.

Conclusion

While having a project manager who is a good leader is highly desirable, the manager function is more critical in order to successfully implement the project, and many project managers are very successful “doer’s,” In addition, complaints by project managers that they do not have the authority to do their job are not always well founded, since they are based on the assumption that only positional authority provides power. Project managers can elicit top performance from project team members by using many other available power sources, including knowledge, skill, obligation, trust, self-determination, and emotional intelligence. What is becoming more common in organizations is a shift from power based on formal authority to these other types of power.

Project managers would be well-served by focusing on the five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. The better you are at adapting your personality style to that of others, the more successful you will be as a project manager. Getting results, resolving conflicts and successfully delivering projects can be accomplished by having a high emotional intelligence – even in a low authority environment.

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