

Project Leadership Best (and worst) Practices

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Team leadership sets the tone for any project. Through training and experience project leaders learn that planning and management can make or break any project.

Dennis Smith of Densmith LLC recently asked participants in a project leadership workshop to discuss the best and worst practices of project leaders. Together, groups composed a list focused around the best and worst in both planning and management. It's interesting that this list is different than most best practices lists, yet these are the topics that are on the minds of people working to improve their project results. Do your leaders do these things?



BEST PRACTICES IN PROJECT LEADERSHIP

QUALITY PLANNING

Good Schedules - This includes realistic commitments, accurate work scope estimates, reliable task descriptions, and accurate and complete identification of project dependencies.

Clear Tasks – Explicit ownership of tasks (no "group" ownership), clear and concise instructions for work products, and follow-through on every project task.

Managed Risks – Conscientious initial definition of risks. Follow-through with identification and management of new and ongoing risks. No risks arbitrarily hidden from the team.

GREAT MANAGEMENT

Lead the Team – Focus on important issues looking ahead into the project, grow team morale, be an employee advocate, motivate the team, and ensure that the team and each individual understand why their work is important.

Manage the Work – Manage conflicts to ensure progress and minimize ineffective use of meeting time. Assure the cooperation of the team members. Hire appropriate people. Understand the business, the technologies, the product, and the project.

WORST PRACTICES IN PROJECT LEADERSHIP

BAD PLANNING

A Rosy-Faced Plan - Managers who tell everyone that the project is in much better shape than it actually is. Misleading with optimism; often accompanied by withholding information.

Size Mismatch – Running a small project within a big-project organization and encumbering it with the overhead and requirements that are needed for large projects. Large-project methods have their place, but not in small teams.

Legacy – Leadership that is too tied into the old products and the old way of doing things. This is a tricky product planning and business trade-off, worthy of a newsletter of its own.

Postmortem Results – Leaders that hold postmortem meetings after most projects, listen to the same issues every time, and never solve the problems. Okay, they probably are tough problems. But if you aren't going to fix them, don't waste the team's time re-listing them after every project.

Rigid Leaders – These are rigid "command and control" leaders who don't like criticism and don't listen. There are a few special circumstances that demand command and control, but those are only a tiny percent of all projects. Listening and understanding are required.

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POOR MANAGEMENT

Details – Some managers get lost in the details of the implementation and don't manage. Businesses always want hands-on managers and supervisors, but there is a limit. Some leaders are so uncomfortable in their leadership role that they will jump into the details to avoid leading the team.