PROJECT LEADERSHIP

# Influence in *Project Leadership*

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

Project management is no longer a command and control process. Project leaders have to get results through people who do not report to them, which is the classic definition of influence.

## Background and philosophy

Project management has changed over time. It is no longer a "command and control" process. Excellent project management today requires outstanding "people leadership." Today's project teams are comprised of cross-functional, cross-global, and cross-cultural members who are tasked to complete projects that have never been done before, in too little time, with too few resources. The opportunities for miscommunication and lack of alignment among the team members and with customers for the project are greater than ever.

Today's project leaders are often located far from many or all members of their project teams. Even when they are not geographically dispersed, project teams' cultural and professional backgrounds can make them very diverse. Geographical distance, time zones, cultural differences, technical jargon all add to the complexity of team communication. Alternative forms of communication such as voice mail, email, and teleconferencing can help, but create their own issues and complexities.

> *There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.*
>
> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

Outstanding project leaders in today's fast changing business environment need to excel in five major areas:

- Aligning a team by building and communicating a clear vision and expectations
- Learning from others; creating an adaptive learning environment

- Acquiring the appropriate human and financial resources to achieve successful results
- Getting things done efficiently and effectively through people who do not report to them directly
- Creating agreements and making decisions in a team setting

Excellence in these five major areas relies on the ability to communicate information and ideas clearly, along with the ability to influence others. Project leadership, whether formal or informal, requires getting things done through a variety of other people, most or all of whom do not report directly to that leader. This is a classic definition of influence.

## Aligning the team: creating a shared vision

Excellent project leaders can communicate the project end results or vision in a way that facilitates members' understanding, motivation, and commitment throughout the course of the project. They know how to create this common vision or "shared intention" in an inclusive and flexible, yet consistent way. This is especially important when projects run into difficulty. Keeping the team members focused on their shared vision of success can prevent a project from going off track. Successful project leaders are able to communicate the expectations of other members clearly and concisely, and they can state their own needs positively and directly. Stating personal needs clearly, concisely, and positively is a skill that all members of a project team need if project milestones are to be achieved.

## Learning from others

Technical knowledge in many environments becomes obsolete within months of learning. Therefore, successful project leaders must create an adaptive learning environment in which both leader and team are updated on all aspects of the project on a continual basis. Leaders need to "learn their way through the project." Knowing that this kind of information is not always easy to obtain, leaders and team members need to ask the right questions in a way that creates an open and honest climate for sharing. Relevant information on any successes or failures should be available to all team members.

> *Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. That is, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not untrained to stand the test.*
>
> WILLIAM JAMES, 1890

## Acquiring resources

One of the most important tasks of a project leader is to make sure the project has the right resources, especially human resources. The ability to recruit talented people, influence a functional manager to provide

key personnel for the project, or persuade a senior manager to be a sponsor may spell the difference between success and failure.

## Getting things done through others

The fourth key skill is the ability to influence members and others who do not report to them directly. Project leaders today have to lead through influence, not through direct power. Often, team members are juggling many commitments and priorities. In many teams, members have responsibilities to functional managers as well as their project responsibilities. Project leaders often need to influence their peers, sponsors, customers, and suppliers as well as team members in order to achieve important results and meet critical milestones. They need to provide effective feedback and course correction as well as encouraging members to work out issues between themselves or managing the inevitable conflicts that erupt among even the most committed team members.

## Creating agreements and making decisions

Finally, effective project leaders know how to help create team agreements so all project team members can do things quickly and predictably. The ability to make decisions quickly and learn from them is key to a project team's success. Some decisions can be made individually, but often, the most important decisions require team agreement and commitment. Agreement on work processes, information-sharing, communication, and decision-making, roles and responsibilities, even selection of new team members can make the difference between a strong, committed project team and a half-hearted work group.

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*Influence is probably the single most-used competency in the day-to-day management of projects.*

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Adapted from the preface to *Exercising Influence: Building Relationships and Getting Results in Project Management*, a program developed by B. Kim Barnes.

## B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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