



POLITICS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The Missing Power Skill

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PROJECT COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

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WHY “POLITICS”?

Project Managers in highly technical fields often lack the interpersonal skills and political experience to lead teams in uncertain project environments successfully.

INTRODUCTION: A PROJECT MANAGER OR A POLITICIAN?

Have you ever been told that you are a politician? If you were, you probably had the same initial reaction I did, one that was initially not positive. I met with an executive recruiter when I was preparing to retire from a 22-year career in the U.S. Navy. At the time, I was still on active duty and was serving as the Owner’s Project Manager for a submarine’s mid-life nuclear reactor refueling and overhaul. The recruiter looked at my resume for about ten seconds, looked up, and stated (matter-of-factly), “You’re a politician.” I was initially taken aback. However, after the brief discussion that followed, I have never viewed the profession of project management the same way again. Her observation highlighted the political nature of my responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of navigating diverse stakeholder interests, building relationships, and maintaining a complete view of project dynamics.

LEVERAGING POWER SKILLS: THE FOUNDATION OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Power skills, also known as soft skills or people skills, play a pivotal role in achieving political success in project management. Power skills are the intangible qualities that enable project managers to navigate the tricky political landscape inherent in project execution. While technical expertise and hard skills are crucial for understanding project requirements and methodologies, power skills are what truly differentiate successful project managers. A frequent observation in engineering-intensive fields is that engineers are often placed in project management roles due to their technical expertise and experience. However, gaps frequently exist in other skills necessary to navigate some of the finer points of project management. These skills encompass a range of interpersonal abilities that facilitate effective communication, collaboration, and relationship-building, all essential for achieving political success in project management. In the context of navigating project politics, power skills are indispensable tools for building consensus, resolving conflicts, and fostering teamwork.

Key power skills for project managers include:

- **Communication:** Communication is a Project Manager's superpower. Effective communication skills lie at the heart of a project manager's ability to navigate the political landscape. Clear and concise communication fosters transparency, alignment, and trust among stakeholders, ensuring alignment on project goals, expectations, and progress. Whether it is delivering presentations to executives, facilitating meetings with cross-functional teams, or negotiating with external partners, project managers must be adept communicators capable of conveying complex information that resonates with diverse audiences. Clear and transparent communication fosters trust and alignment among team members, mitigating misunderstandings and conflicts.
- **Empathy:** Empathy enables project managers to understand the perspectives and motivations of stakeholders, fostering rapport and cooperation. Managers can cultivate a supportive and inclusive work environment by empathizing with team members' challenges and concerns. Challenges individuals are facing are often projected onto the people around them, resulting in misinterpretation of messages and actions. It is imperative that project managers (as leaders within the organization) assume positive intent in the actions of others and that they seek first to understand the motivations of others before acting. By empathizing with others, project managers become more effective leaders and develop credibility among team members.
- **Adaptability:** Projects are inherently dynamic, often requiring rapid adaptation to changing circumstances and priorities. Project managers with strong adaptability can navigate volatility and unexpected challenges with resilience and agility, maintaining momentum and morale. This adaptability often has a calming effect on others and is generally more well-received by other stakeholders than reacting to challenges in a volatile or dynamic way.

- **Conflict Resolution:** Conflicts are inevitable in project environments due to differing opinions, priorities, or personalities. Effective conflict resolution involves actively listening to all parties, seeking common ground, and facilitating constructive dialogue to reach mutually beneficial solutions. Conflict resolution skills are often necessary when negotiations are required to effectively manage resources, budgets, and scope.

“Due to the complexity of projects and the unpredictability of internal and external forces, organizations should focus on enhancing employees’ power skills for adapting to new work environments.”

— Pulse of the Profession® 2024, Project Management Institute

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE SERVANT LEADER’S MINDSET: A CATALYST FOR SUCCESS

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one’s and others’ emotions. In project management, EQ enables leaders to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, inspire trust, and foster collaboration. Servant leadership, a philosophy rooted in empathy, humility, and service to others, embodies the principles of emotional intelligence, making it a potent force for achieving project success and managing project politics.

Key components of emotional intelligence and servant leadership include:

- **Self-awareness:** Self-awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence, enabling leaders to recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and emotional triggers. Servant leaders cultivate self-awareness through introspection and feedback, allowing them to lead authentically and transparently.
- **Self-Regulation:** Self-regulation involves managing one’s emotions and impulses, particularly in challenging situations. Servant leaders exhibit emotional resilience, remaining calm and composed under pressure, inspiring team members’ confidence and stability.
- **Social Awareness:** Social awareness entails understanding the emotions, needs, and perspectives of others. Servant leaders actively listen to their team members, demonstrate empathy, and create a supportive environment where everyone feels valued and understood.
- **Relationship Management:** Effective relationship management is essential for building trust, resolving conflicts, and fostering collaboration within project teams. Servant leaders prioritize their team members’ well-being and development, creating a culture of mutual respect and accountability.

POLITICS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT: A COMPLEX INTERPLAY

Project managers must navigate the political landscape within and outside the project organization for the successful execution of the projects we undertake. “Politics” in project management refers to the intricate network of relationships, interests, and power dynamics that influence decision-making and project outcomes. In addition to the interests of the primary stakeholder (our clients or the organization we work for), other stakeholders’ interests often must be considered, and these interests must be balanced. Other stakeholders include construction teams, service providers, vendors, and the people assigned to the project, where internal hierarchies often converge. Competing interests can reduce information flow, leading to project delays, cost impacts, resource allocation issues (under and over-utilization), and conflict. Understanding and navigating these political dynamics and helping stakeholders rise above them is crucial for project success.



At its core, politics in project management manifests in several forms:

- **Stakeholder Dynamics:** Project stakeholders have their objectives, expectations, and influence levels. Managing their diverse interests while aligning with project goals requires astute political acumen. Project managers must lean on their ability to influence without authority in order to align everyone to the best interests of the project while still meeting their own individual objectives.
- **Organizational Culture:** Every organization has a unique culture, which shapes communication patterns, decision-making processes, and power structures. Project managers must quickly assess these nuances and consider them when defining and developing project roles and responsibilities, communication plans, and reporting requirements.
- **Resource Allocation:** Allocation of personnel, budgets, and time often becomes a battleground of competing priorities and interests. Political maneuvering is essential to secure the necessary resources and prioritize project requirements. As project schedules shift, personnel resources frequently become constrained, resulting in the need for increased communication, negotiation, and collaboration to help level-load resources across various groups.



- **Risk Management:** Identifying and mitigating risks is critical to project management. However, political considerations can sometimes overshadow objective risk assessments, leading to biased decision-making and unforeseen challenges. Project managers need to maintain an unbiased, holistic view of the project while helping others understand how their work impacts the project as a whole. The project manager can more effectively identify, assess, and mitigate potential project risks when maintaining an unbiased perspective. Political savvy may be needed to convince stakeholders to set aside their interests to move the project forward effectively.

The political realm of project management extends beyond internal office dynamics to encompass interactions with regulatory bodies, industry associations, competitors, and government agencies. Understanding and influencing these external factors is crucial for aligning project objectives and proactively addressing potential risks. Moreover, internal organizational politics can significantly shape decision-making, resource allocation, and project prioritization. Successful navigation of these dynamics demands political acumen to secure support, allocate resources effectively, and overcome competing interests.

CONCLUSION

As I progressed through the ranks during my Naval career, I was taught that a manager’s job involves “keeping workers working” and that an effective way to do that is to remove the obstacles that impede the progress of those you are working with. This is where I first learned how to apply the concepts of servant leadership and saw first-hand just how practical this approach can be. Using the key components of EQ, we can better empower and develop our teams while maintaining humility and authenticity. This approach tends to lead to greater personal acceptance and political impact, further increasing one’s ability to exert influence without direct authority over stakeholders. The result is improved project outcomes through open communication, improved transparency, and more effective collaboration.

Navigating political dynamics requires more than technical expertise—it demands emotional intelligence, servant leadership, and adept interpersonal skills. In some cases, and for some projects, a more direct approach is needed. However, by understanding the nuances of project politics, leveraging power skills, and embracing the principles of servant leadership, project managers can steer their teams toward success amidst challenges and uncertainties. Project managers and leaders should strive to improve in these areas to augment their technical expertise and leadership skills. Additionally, as we continue to evolve in how projects are managed through the use of more advanced software, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, we must recognize the power of soft skills, servant leadership, and emotional intelligence in influencing team dynamics and achieving successful project outcomes, and in shaping the future of project management.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bradberry, T., Greaves, J., et al. (2009). *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*. TalentSmart.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press.





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