Evolving project leadership

From command and control to engage and empower

by
Gordon MacKay

MBA, BSc(Hons) BA(Hons) MAPM MInstLM

Association for Project Management

First published 2021

Contents

Contents

Preface

"How would you measure or assess project leadership behaviours?"

When originally asked this question, having assessed many projects for complexity, I assumed that assessing leadership behaviours would be straightforward. After all, the *APM Body of Knowledge 7th edition* definition clearly states that good leadership 'inspires and aligns for a common cause'. How hard can it be to test for that? All I had to do was identify project leadership behaviours that achieve this, and then assess for evidence of their application.

In reality it was far from straightforward. First, I discovered that the behaviours most associated with leadership as generally applied are not at all what project leadership requires. It also turned out that the *kind* of leadership required has, in any case, changed, and in ways that are all too often unacknowledged.

This book presents the practitioner with two journeys. The first establishes a vision of what, in fact, good project leadership must do if it is to be effective. The second offers concrete steps to achieving this.

For those willing to get behind stereotypes and assumptions, it also offers a personal journey of discovery, leading to a richer, deeper appreciation of how what is required in delivery of both project management and leadership is evolving.

This need for personal 'continuing professional development' will be shown in turn to drive the continuing 'profession' development that is now necessary to meet demands from increasingly complex delivery environments. Similarly, only an 'empowered' team, collaborating across all disciplines, has the agility and expertise equal to such emergent complexity.

The research underpinning this book draws on many disciplines, and both professional and academic literature. It is also informed by personal experience. From Royal Naval engineering apprentice, and 20 years in project management, including line management of 1,200 staff, I witnessed, experienced and learned from leadership, both good and bad. Both prompt my ongoing commitment to fostering the good in myself and others.

Clarifying what is needed of project leadership; digging beneath surface assumptions as never before, I discovered scientific evidence showing that

traditional portrayals of assertive 'command and control' leadership are far from inspiring; they actually alienate, disenfranchise and often antagonise.

Neuroscience offers insights rooted in evidence-based research, challenging the efficacy of command-and-control behaviours in particular. It consistently shows that such behaviours actively *inhibit* performance. They not only disincline others either to follow or collaborate, but they actually render them less *able* to! They 'inspire' failure.

How was I to equate or reconcile these contradictory portrayals implying that threatening behaviour could be 'inspiring'? And how, I also wondered, came such behaviours to be associated with 'leadership' in the first place? Uncovering the now much-needed vision of project leadership that follows, provided often unexpected answers to these questions.

I am surprised by the extent to which such clichés and stereotypes of leadership persist. They generally gloss over what it is like to be on the receiving end. Would those promoting such behaviours be 'inspired' if treated that way? Would most people?

I therefore challenge the validity of such behaviours imported without scrutiny into the practice of project management. This prompted a profound shift in my personal understanding, of both project management and project *leadership*. I had to ask what specifically project leadership behaviours must *do*; what they must achieve.

One powerful realisation informing my awareness of what project leadership behaviours must achieve had an unlikely source. The demands imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic mirror those of project delivery in inherently complex, volatile environments. They drive home the message that, just as responding to a pandemic requires agility, collaboration and the full engagement of all, so, too, does project delivery.

Carrying out hundreds of interviews and assessments with project managers encouraged a deep respect for those exhibiting the form of leadership promoted here. I have also, as I am sure many will relate to, observed and experienced, first-hand, those command-and-control behaviours posing as leadership, that felt threatening and fell far short of inspiring trust and loyalty.

My growing awareness of the prevalence of such misrepresentations of leadership prompted an earnest desire to expose and call out such behaviours for what they are.

This then informs the vision of effective project leadership required for the delivery of effective teams. The returns on offer are out of all proportion to the investment required in establishing project leadership in team delivery.

Preface

The benefits of a leadership that fosters and realises the potential of all will, in addition, set such a compelling standard as will inspire emulation far beyond our profession.

The Association for Project Management has been instrumental in supporting me throughout this endeavour, and the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed. To James Simons, Ros James and Clare Georgy in particular, and all who reviewed early drafts, along with the patient support of my partner Paula from concept to publication, I owe and express my sincere gratitude.

Gordon MacKay
MBA, BSc(Hons) BA(Hons)
MAPM MInstLM

Introduction

This book offers a structured path to effective project management, leadership and team delivery.

Fundamental changes in the nature of the delivery environment have effectively reframed the very role and function of the project manager. They present compelling drivers necessitating a fundamentally new approach to delivery adopting more fit-for-purpose project leadership behaviours.

Building on neuroscience it will be shown why traditional portrayals of 'heroic leadership', such as alpha-male dominance behaviours (command and control), are actually counter-productive in project delivery. An effective vision for project leadership must replace such behaviours by those nurturing and empowering team agility, synergy and collaboration.

Whether they are an aspiring project leader, an experienced professional, or anyone seeking insights into effective project leadership, a common thread is the practitioner's own willingness and ability to adapt. It demands an increased awareness and acknowledgement that their role is more about effecting collaborative working than commanding and controlling.

To address this, the book is structured in the following way:

- **CHAPTERS 1–3:** We begin by showing how the function of project leadership has changed, calling traditional leadership portrayals and assertive command-and-control behaviours to account.
- **CHAPTERS 4–5:** We present a new way of thinking about and exercising project leadership, and a path to achieving a harmonious style that is more in keeping with today's project environment.
- **CHAPTERS 6–8:** We look at how the move to a more collaborative style of leadership can have much wider benefits for project teams and project-based organisations, and ultimately for project success.
- **Chapter 9–10:** We highlight how the establishment of project leadership at the individual, team and organisational level liberates an agility and resilience in delivery traditional command and control stereotypes of leadership cannot equal.

Evolving project leadership

We explore the ascension in relevance of project 'leadership' in the project 'management' profession, finding it mirrors the ascendance of stakeholder 'engagement' over stakeholder 'management'.

Since both project management and project leadership are relatively new professions, the distinguishing characteristics of each are explored to demonstrate the increasing relevance of the latter. From this, effective project leadership competences are then identified, established and expanded upon.

Command-and-control (C&C) type behaviours have long been associated with traditional leadership, but are they relevant in project management today?

Honest scrutiny informed by scientific research reveals, as will be shown, that they are, more often than not, a liability. This reveals a clear and present need to adopt a new vision as to the most effective form project leadership should take.

This uncovering and exploration of previously unquestioned assumptions prompts an increasing need to act. Just as form follows function, the path to project leadership must be forged with a compelling vision of its new destination, 'what good looks like', now, in project leadership.

Exploring how this vision of project leadership might be realised informed the creation of both an effective model and structured path for project managers aspiring to realise their individual potential in project leadership.

But, as will be shown, simply focusing on project management is not enough, if the full benefits and power of project leadership is to be realised. The persistent cost of negative behaviours adversely affects *all* engaged in project delivery, so this too must be addressed at the organisational level.

What leadership has been and now is, continues to evolve

Generic forms of leadership and associated behaviours have evolved over time. Within them, as with the evolution of all human behaviours, vestiges and remnants of less useful or even counter-productive behaviours do inevitably persist, reflecting their diverse cultures and evolutionary origins.

Readers bring diverse knowledge, experience and assumptions to the concept of 'leadership'. So, to establish common ground, it is important to clarify how today's behaviours and forms of traditional leadership were, and continue to be, heavily influenced by their evolutionary origins. Even at the individual level, current attitudes and assumptions towards leadership have roots, but these are rarely examined.

Seeds sown and accepted in childhood persist. Unquestioned, they continue to pervade adult portrayals of leadership. Parents, teachers and others in authority populated our imagination; defining what we thought we could, should or should not do, or even 'be'

During that impressionable stage, ahead of any developed sense of self, those 'in charge', defined what 'leadership' looked like, and how it felt to be a 'follower'. This early unexamined, unquestioned, utterly naïve sense of what leadership looked and felt like has a profound effect on what is later accepted and expected.

Both knowledge and experience of leadership is continually informed and reinforced through each culture's legacy of inspiring stories, myths and legends. Vividly portrayed, they become almost inseparable from our inner characterisation of what leadership looks like. This gradually accumulated sense of what leadership *is* remains largely unconscious; it is rarely brought to conscious attention or examined by the adult mind. For most, in fact, no reason to query traditional associations between assertive 'command-and-control' behaviours and leadership, whether in the world at large or in project management, may ever have arisen. Until now.

This book begins by doing just that, calling traditional leadership portrayals and assertive, command-and-control behaviours to account. Project leadership can then be framed in a way that accounts for its changed function in contemporary project management delivery.

Although unsettling, reflecting maturely through the eyes of an experienced adult on things one accepted without question as a child presents opportunities for a significant evolution in personal development.

At this point the reader is encouraged to take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- Think of a fictional portrayal of leadership. What did they say and do?
- Imagine yourself as one of the 'led'. How would it feel to be spoken or so told what to do?
- Recall one in your life who has inspired you to be or do more than you thought you could be or do. What did they say? How did they speak to you?
- Compare these two examples. How does your experience of being inspired relate to the traditional portrayal?

This potentially challenging exercise in reflection reveals one's willingness and ability to revisit untested assumptions, and to be open to seeing things beyond the habitual.

3

1

The changing face of project leadership

> The practitioner is invited to review and reflect on the changing nature of leadership and delivery environments. Responding to emergent complexity, driven by interdependent technologies in delivery, demands agility at rates that traditional command-and-control leadership cannot achieve.
>
> This 'emergent complexity' demands a paradigm shift towards a more collaborative and empowering set of leadership behaviours within the integrated project team, and stakeholder relationships built on mutually acknowledged and respected interests.
>
> - The need to distinguish project leadership from traditional forms.
> - Changing nature of delivery environments.
>
>   □ AI and project data.
>   □ VUCA.
>
> - Collaborative leadership.
> - Paradigm shifts, eg stakeholder engagement supersedes management.

At first glance, the concept of 'project leadership' seems uncontentious. For many, 'it goes without saying'; it's *just* the application of 'traditional leadership', but in a 'project' setting. And since leadership is a concept familiar to all, there is not much more to be said.

Pressed a little further, one might be directed to traditional models reflecting various approaches or techniques. Some might even acknowledge the evolutionary roots of behaviours associated with leadership, a vast legacy with archetypal roots predating humanity itself.

This diversity of concepts around 'leadership' deserves close attention to ensure a common understanding and currency around its usage. On reflection it becomes apparent; just beneath the surface of terms project practitioners take

7

largely for granted, there is significant ambiguity. General and traditional portrayals of 'management' and 'leadership' reflect wildly diverse contexts, and are manifested in behaviours that are not readily reconciled.

On this basis alone it is apparent that, before defining competent project leadership and how it is to be achieved, it is necessary to determine whether, and if so, how, project leadership differs from that exercised in other situations.

This chapter will show that when it comes to leadership, 'all that glitters is not gold', so by challenging unquestioned assumptions about traditional views and behaviours associated with leadership, it will make more apparent 'what good looks like' when it comes to project delivery.

But such definition is not readily or rightly obtained by focusing on the project leader's behaviour. For their behaviour should itself be defined by what they must *do* for effective delivery.

In fact, what the project manager must now do, in delivery, has itself changed significantly. The way projects are delivered, how they are delivered and who delivers them, and the contexts in which project delivery increasingly occurs – *all* have been and are changing.

Asking most project managers what they do will often result in stock answers reflecting adherence to process and baselines. This can bear surprisingly little relation to what would actually be observed, day to day, by watching their activities. Given what is now needed for successful delivery, it might well come as a surprise to discover that the time spent in securing successful stakeholder engagement, and coaching for delegation, significantly exceeds that exercised in directing, commanding and controlling their line-of-control reports.

The significance of these multi-dimensional changes must not be underestimated. Each affects all the others. The job and role description for a project manager exercising project leadership today seeks abilities and competences quite different from those before new technology spanned all disciplines in both delivery and deliverables.

This chapter will therefore focus on clarifying what project leadership is and should be, by first exposing what it is not, and why. It will be shown that much associated with traditional leadership, as promoted and presented, has no place in project delivery and its leadership.

Asked to give examples of leadership in the world at large, the faces and actions of many famous men and women will readily spring to mind. Vivid examples of great leadership may be exemplified in their words or actions. Dramatic accounts show the leader asserting their authority and expertise to impose conformity on their followers and direct them.

The observer is not generally prompted to consider how it would feel to find oneself a follower in such circumstances, or whether such behaviours depicted in fundamentally different and often extreme situations are relevant or even appropriate. On reflection, however, it soon becomes apparent that there is a tremendous difference when considering such behaviours in a project delivery environment as opposed to a battlefield or other crisis situation.

How does project leadership differ from traditional representations? Figure 1 marks the first step in illustrating how traditional and project leadership differs. It contrasts both, reflecting differing organisational structures and behaviours within each.

Subjecting the concept of project leadership, perhaps for the first time, to informed scrutiny, it might be assumed that *traditional* leadership behaviours, and their function, are of a kind with those appropriate to *project* leadership. Yet, as will be shown, this turns out to be a false assumption; a conflation of contrasting and in many ways contradictory manifestations of leadership behaviours, as shown in Figure 1. And they must be understood as such, if the true function and form of project leadership is to emerge.

Just as a journalist may tend to focus on crisis, conflict and controversy, so too, traditional narratives intended to exemplify leadership focus on 'dramatic' events, and personas typified in the stereotypes of steely-eyed, square-jawed heroes. Such portrayals of crisis tend to play down or ignore how the same leader, over extended periods of time, built up their reputation, inspiring trust and loyalty.

Traditional stereotypes of leadership conflate behaviours required in rare moments of extreme crisis with what is required to establish and earn the title of leader as bestowed by others.

They skew perceptions, distort them, and in so doing promote and exaggerate the relevance and effectiveness of command-and-control behaviours. They are projected as central to leadership generally when, more often than not, their true effectiveness is limited to extreme situations where the immediacy of peril precludes debate or question. Seldom is this ever justified in project leadership.

Exploring and differentiating between 'traditional' and 'project' leadership, it soon becomes clear that some behaviours traditionally associated with such 'leadership-in-extremis' are either redundant or counter-productive. They represent what Carl Sagan described as 'evolutionary baggage'. Identified as such, they can be set aside in favour of fit-for-purpose project leadership behaviours supporting collaborative, aligned delivery.

3

Project leaders
deliver teams

Emergent constraints and demands in delivery establish a compelling demand for leadership in a form maximising resilience and agility in delivery.

This brings to centre stage the previously downplayed function of coaching, with attendant competence in so-called 'soft skills', including empathy and emotional intelligence.

The practitioner is urged to recognise the vast return on investment in team delivery from a team coached to realise their individual and collective potential.

This section begins with the recognition that 'project management' is, increasingly, a contradiction in terms. Managerial 'command and control' does not inspire or, engage, nor does it foster the synergy of collaborative working.

The function of delivery to cost, time, quality and scope remains. But, the function *in* delivery is to adopt a form fit for purpose in increasingly VUCA external and internal delivery environments. This chapter expands on the new function of project leadership – what it seeks to achieve as underpinned by

**PROJECT
MANAGEMENT**
FUNCTIONAL
ORG STRUCTURE

PM full line authority
Command and control
PM centralised expertise
In-house delivery

**PROJECT
LEADERSHIP**
PROJECTISED MATRIX
ORG STRUCTURE

PM little line authority
Team engagement/ownership collaboration
Devolved multi-disciplinary expertise
Sub-contracted-out delivery
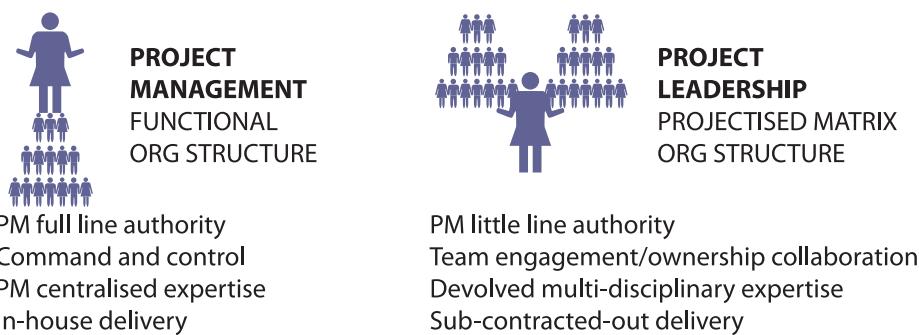
Figure 5 Project leadership, changing context, changing function

relevant contemporary theory. It is followed by a structured approach for the aspirant and practising project leader to apply, in order to establish effective project leadership.

The function of project leadership is to empower and facilitate the realisation of individual and team potential, and the emergence of collaborative team synergy.

Just as the function and form of 'stakeholder management' shifts towards 'stakeholder *engagement'*, so too, now, successful project delivery requires a move from 'project *management*' to a function and congruent form resulting in a fully 'engaged', collaborative team. What 'engages' the team, and all project stakeholders? Project *leadership*.

As we have seen from the SCARF Model, project leadership is not well served by traditional command-and-control behaviours. So what *is* needed? What are the drivers and function of leadership in a project environment? Given any highly educated, multi-disciplinary project delivery team, what *can* inform the function to be fulfilled and the behaviours appropriate to achieve it?

The function of project leadership is to engage the entire project team and all the project's stakeholders. But this is not engagement in the sense of Patrick O'Brian's 'Jack Aubrey' raising the gun ports to 'engage the enemy'. Its focus is not so much on engaging with them, as about getting them, as stakeholders, to engage with the project leader, the project and other stakeholders.

The project leader must also 'negotiate and influence' stakeholders. *'. . . the people involved in the work, from sponsor to team member, are part of the effort to keep the stakeholder appropriately engaged and influenced to do the right things*". Here too, 'stakeholder engagement' is defined as "*The systematic identification, analysis, planning and implementation of actions designed to influence stakeholders'. APM Body of Knowledge 7ᵗʰ edition*.

As with stakeholder management being about getting *them* to engage, so with influence the focus is on helping stakeholders find their own best way to engage with the project, rather than directing or telling. To achieve such influence, the project leader and team through coaching will need to develop *contextual and cultural awareness, communication and conflict resolution skills*.

The *rate* at which complexity in project delivery continues to increase reflects the occurrence of events arising in the environment that simply could not have been anticipated, never mind measured the "unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know", as the former US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, is often quoted as saying.

The challenge of increasing, emergent complexity

Unknown unknowns are like black swans. Everyone knows all swans are white, until the day a black swan paddles into view. The history of science is rich with anecdotes of unexpected discoveries giving rise to entire industries. They range from the now ubiquitous Post-it note emerging from the development of a 'failed' glue that 'doesn't stick', to the accidental discovery of penicillin.

What all such stories have in common is that they were the result of 'emergent complexity'; where bringing 'A' and 'B' together resulted in something unplanned and unexpected.

Time and again, scrutiny of failure to deliver projects – especially within the constraint of 'time', reveals such 'emergent' complexity; issues and impacts arising unexpectedly during delivery that simply could not have been anticipated at the outset. Turbulent environments where any change triggers a cascade of others are a classic source of emergent complexity, and there's no more resonant example of this than the appearance of one isolated case of COVID-19. Like the classic example from chaos theory, this was like the fluttering of the butterfly wings that resulted in a hurricane sweeping across the entire world.

If it is to be effective, project leadership must adapt to take account of this kind of complexity. This section therefore addresses the question of what characterises fit-for-purpose leadership in such a dynamic environment. What does 'good' look like?

While some endeavours requiring many players benefit from centralised command and control, in general the contemporary project delivery environment is populated by SMEs' diverse skills and stakeholders more qualified than the project manager in their respective domains.

The necessity for empowerment and therefore coaching

What this environment, and the wide diversity of increasing technical specialisations *does* call for, is a far more empowered and autonomous delivery team, working collaboratively.

Working alongside engaged stakeholders, such a team benefits from the intelligence, not of a single authority figure, but the combined input of all SMEs.

Chapter 3 Learning outcomes

1. Project leadership in team delivery is about creating teams who can deliver.
2. Team members are stakeholders whose willing engagement must be sought through the establishment of mutual respect, support and rapport.
3. The central function of the project leader is that of coach – fostering and encouraging engagement and collaboration with and between team members.
4. Coaching is not an added extra or nice-to-have. It is not the first activity to be dropped as pressure increases, but the last. The return in benefit outweighs invested time and effort by orders of magnitude.

Stakeholder engagement must be informed by the principle, 'lead as they would be led'.

5

Organisational foundations enabling and supporting the project leader journey

In addition, the necessity of wider strategic and organisation support in structures and processes highlights the fact that the project manager will not achieve the full benefits of project leadership alone.

The project manager will not likely realise project leadership's benefits working in isolation. Wider organisational support in active strategy, structures and processes is vital, and while initiated top-down, must be nurtured at all levels.

Organisations promoting organisation-wide awareness and expectations of project leadership behaviours must extend this to project leader selection, performance assessment and promotion.

Key challenges in developing Insight

The development of grounded, informed situational awareness generates Insight into the current status of the team as a unit. It requires the project leader to scrutinise their *own* competence, before doing the same with each team member, then assessing the performance and collaborative effectiveness of the team as a whole.

At the organisational level, Insight prompts measures promoting reflective practice by all project managers. Lean enterprise organisational practices encourage ongoing review of processes, minimising waste and increasing value creation. So too, at the individual level, the reflective practitioner in project management is encouraged to consider how and if their way of working

is as effective as it could or should be. Is it appropriate for their current environment?

From an organisational perspective, the promised benefits released by application of the Triple Catalyst include removing the ongoing sunk-cost of outmoded leadership styles. The additional benefits stemming from establishing empowered collaborative teams cannot be denied.

On the plus side, establishing expectations and organisational support for the practice of Insight is a powerful, compelling and welcome initiative for those accepting the need for change and growth. From these, at the individual level, there is no resistance; for them the next part of this book offers a clear and welcome path.

However, to realise the benefits the Triple Catalyst promises for the *entire* organisation and its stakeholders, it is crucial to ask *how* its adoption might be promoted and *embedded* at the *organisation level*, what challenges might emerge, and how they might best be resolved.

The challenge in promoting the practice of Insight at the organisational level, from the top down, is that there will be those who resist and even resent its adoption. Their attitudes and behaviours represent a real problem. For among project managers there will certainly be some who, far from welcoming the change, will feel not only their source of power but their very identity undermined.

They will resist the introspection, needed to exercise the practice of 'Insight', and all organisational drives to evidence or promote its recognition or adoption. For them, the team exists to do *their* bidding, and stakeholders, including the delivery team, should defer to their management. They were, from the start, attracted to the project management function by an ambition for power over others. They anticipated the role of project manager conferring a licence to exercise command-and-control behaviours.

Those at the 'independent' stage on the Leadership Performance Curve are in-dependence on esteem-from-others to support their ego-centric self-construal. They have much in common with the behaviours typical of a narcissist. Strongly advocating and deploying command-and-control behaviours at every opportunity, they are likely to reject any need to develop Insight and self-awareness. They are also likely to assert that the importance of their project is such that delivery must take precedence over personal considerations; delivery time constraints mean that coaching and team member development can and should be set aside.

With little empathy for those in their remit, they feel themselves justified in treating them as a means to an end. They project blame for shortcomings or deficits onto others. Meanwhile, any credit for work carried out by the team, they deem as their due entitlement. They invariably declare themselves as an exception to rules or norms, exempt from performance assessments, qualification standards, and any need for training.

There is, then, a very deep conflict between the organisational and strategic need for true project leadership, and those least willing, or able, to embrace it.

An informed focus for change

It is tempting to adopt a traditional approach to cultural change, by attempting to implement top-down management initiatives focusing tightly and specifically on the aberrant behaviours of the 'resistance' – those routinely exhibiting command-and-control behaviours, oblivious or in denial about their counter-productive effects.

However, the energy and time expended in focusing on this minority is likely to be wasted. If any change or lasting evolution is to occur in those actively resisting it, it will not be through imposition from the 'top down', or 'outside in'. What is required is a means to precipitate a revolution or paradigm shift in outlook and perspective, an inside-out transformation in their perception and behaviours. The attraction of command and control has always been promoted through heroic narratives and stories; at the very heart of its allure was the offer of an elevated identity, endowed with an almost mythical dimension. For those in-dependence on esteem for others, this is irresistible. For this reason, evolving a culture supportive of project leadership among those inclined towards traditional command and control necessitates the establishment of a new narrative – one that subverts and replaces the old with something more appealing. To do that requires some understanding of the psychology differentiating those who are in-dependence from the interdependent.

A psychological understanding of resistance

For those whose identity is in-dependence on traditional command-and-control authority, the conversion to interdependence presents as a fundamental challenge – even a threat. Reframing the function and form of leadership away

Chapter 5 Learning outcomes

1. Organisational support is vital to the realisation of project leaderships benefits.
2. Promoting and establishing standards of appropriate project leadership behaviours will raise awareness of those that are not.
3. Evolving expectations of project leadership behaviours should include the culture and psychological delivery environment they create.
4. Hiring, selection and promotion must evolve to reflect the sought after 'soft' skills, qualities, attributes and competences required of the project leader.