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Seven strategies for project managers: Leading without authority

Finding the right team motivators

Project managers are like kings without a country. They lead a project team but have no authority. They are not the line managers of their team members. Nevertheless, project managers can achieve buy-in, motivate and lead their teams without the need for any disciplinary action. Leadership expert Anna-Maria Muck explains seven strategies for project managers to address this "power gap".

For weeks, the IT project manager was annoyed by a team member. The software developer did not stick to appointments and agreements, missed team meetings, and did not exercise due care. The challenge: The project manager could not sanction him. He was not his superior. A fellow project manager experienced this before and had a suggestion: entrust the developer with more responsibilities in an area of interest to the developer. The trick worked: The changed responsibility improved the motivation of the developer. He was the first in the meeting room. The project manager was stunned.

Leading without power: many project managers face this challenge. Their company seconds subject matter experts into the project team. This team reports to the project manager functionally – dotted line – for the duration of the project, but not hierarchically – straight line. He can neither reward his team members with rewards or promotions nor sanction them. He must lead without authority. "Without this hierarchical power project managers are not powerless" explains Anna-Maria Muck, a specialist for leadership with next level consulting. Modern leadership not only uses power but also trust and understanding. Many project managers now lead laterally: they use their authority as project managers, build a stable working relationship, seek to understand, adjust their leadership style to different types of team members and aim at motivating their team members with assignments. "Lateral leadership is based on a genuine interest in the person, psychological skills, and awareness, as well as diplomacy." Anna-Maria Muck adds. She recommends seven strategies for leadership without authority:

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First strategy: Understand your team members

Successful project managers build their team from the perspective of their team members. They ask: Why should the person commit herself to the project? What does she gain, what motivates her? What are her priorities? Initially, this is based on assumptions and later validated during conversations. "It is important that project managers do not shy away from their management duty but explore leadership options systematically," says Anna-Maria Muck. Anyone who understands their team members usually finds multiple ways to create buy-in and lead without power.

Second strategy: Seek agreement

Many project managers start the project by giving direct orders, assigning responsibilities and tasks. This is a mistake. Experts recommend first to establish an agreement about the objectives as and the approach to take. This agreement helps to build trust. Key questions include: What is the vision of the project? What change does it impose on their own or their clients' organizations? How can the team collaborate to achieve the common goals? "Such an approach puts the leadership in a positive light right from the beginning," says Anna-Maria Muck, "the project manager takes the lead and opens up to the team, so he can assume that they will do the same."

Third strategy: Manage employees individually

People "tick" differently. That is why project experts lead individuals individually. They adapt their leadership style depending on the needs of the team member. For example, some need stability and a firm context for their work. These "security conscious" can be won over with a stable framework of workflows and clear rules for cooperation. The type "harmonious" is different. He needs a lot of personal connection, feedback, and encouragement. A "dominant" team member is yet different and managed by a skillful project manager by delegating responsibility that helps him to achieve his personal objectives in the project. However, this individual approach

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must remain overall balanced. "Consider the balance between the individual's needs and what the team can tolerate," says Anna-Maria Muck. Typical issues are ground rules and processes in the team: Security conscious team members need them, but dominant team members despise them.

Fourth strategy: Find the motivators

Some people feel motivated when they can have lunch at noon and go to the canteen with colleagues. This may seem pedantic - but it may prove to be an efficient motivator. What is important is that not all people are motivated in the same way. What causes indifference in one person can trigger peak performance in others. For example, empathic people are often thrilled by a chance to help others and do good by their colleagues. Other motivators include recognition, status or self-realization. "Try to understand what motivates each of your team members," says Anna-Maria Muck.

Fifth strategy: Provide space to grow

Many employees enjoy working in projects: broader responsibilities, different skills, new roles. Project managers should trump this and provide their team members with opportunities for further development. For example, they can work at more challenging tasks than before, take more decision-making responsibilities, or decide how they work. However, this freedom, self-realization, and experimentation must strike a balance with the overall project objectives.

Sixth Strategy: Constant improvement

The art of lateral leadership demands a lot from the project manager. He has to compensate for the lack of hierarchical power with social competence, situational awareness, empathy, and openness. Thus, lateral leadership often requires self-reflection. Experienced project managers repeatedly ask if their leadership assumptions still hold true. For example, their assumptions about the motivators of individual team members. "Lateral leadership

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means that you have to exercise, experiment and learn from experience," says Anna-Maria Muck.

Seventh strategy: Self-marketing

Some people are born leaders. They do not need to push through. They can inspire enthusiasm and attract employees effortlessly. However, lateral leadership requires more. Also, rather introvert qualities like situational awareness and active listening are hallmarks of leaders. "Some project managers compensate for their lack of charisma with clever diplomacy and good self-marketing," says Anna-Maria Muck. They use, for example, their personal network to support team members, deliberately leverage their subject matter expertise or deeper insights. "Excellence among project managers also manifests itself through self-marketing," the specialist observed.

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