

The Role of Leadership in Project Success

By: Jeff Birenbaum



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Abstract

In this paper, Jeff Birenbaum, Vice President at Lehrer Cumming, shares valuable insights regarding the importance of effective leadership in successfully managing multi-disciplinary design and construction teams.

Introduction

Project owners care deeply about hiring architects, contractors, and other construction service providers who are proven experts in their specific area, and rightly so: it is of tremendous importance that the team designing and building a project has the knowledge and experience to meet or exceed the owner's expectations. But as important as knowledge and expertise are, these factors are only part of the overall success story and will only take you so far without quality leadership, especially on a large project with numerous team members across a multitude of disciplines. For example, a project may have the best architect in the world, the best GC in the world, and all the best specialists you can find, but without someone to unify their efforts, drive accountability, provide motivation, foster clear communication, and encourage the collaboration necessary to achieve the owner's vision, the final outcome will be far less than the sum of its parts.

To ensure that project team members all work together toward a common goal — in this case, the owner's vision for the project — it is crucial to hire and empower strong project leadership. In this paper, we will take a closer look at what that kind of leadership looks like and demonstrate just how such leadership can serve as the determinative factor on any project.

Whether a project is managed and led by someone internal to the owner's organization or by an external consultant, they should possess, at a minimum, each of the following attributes:

1. They understand the entire construction and development process from start to finish.
2. They are clear communicators and have a proven communication process for others to follow.
3. They are confident and comfortable in leading a diverse and multi-disciplinary team.
4. They empower their team to take initiative, be proactive, and do their job.



1. Broad Expertise

Research shows that generalists — those with knowledge and expertise across multiple disciplines — are found in leadership positions more frequently than specialists. There is good reason for this: while specialists typically understand their own area of expertise at a deep level and with more nuance, a generalist is able to “see the big picture” and apply solutions that are cross-disciplinary rather than narrowly focused. A generalist may not be truly excellent at any one thing in the way that a specialist might, but they understand and excel at most everything across the board. Conversely, just because someone is not a top expert in a given domain does not automatically make them a jack-of-all-trades.

It's important for an owner to find the right generalist, of course. Shallow expertise across multiple areas is not going to cut it. When choosing a person or firm to manage their project, owners must look for someone who can speak the languages of design, soft and hard costs, and understand the entire construction and development process; this will earn the trust and respect of all stakeholders, trades, end users, and other affected parties. It is equally important to select a strong communicator who understands the perspectives and concerns of each team member, and who is knowledgeable enough in all of these aspects, including business in general, to make difficult, cross-disciplinary decisions that take all relevant factors into account. A good leader will not only possess and apply this broad knowledge but will also seek out information, ask questions, and defer to trusted resources as necessary.

It is crucial that the team members delivering the work are experts in their given field. It is equally important that the person leading them respects and understands what they do and why, and that they possess this respect and understanding across all the disciplines represented on a given project.

2. Clear and Consistent Communication

To achieve a successful construction project in any environment, the project manager and other key leadership must work in concert with all stakeholders, including the owner and their employees, board members or other key decision-makers, operations and maintenance staff, end users, and of course those working the project, such as architects, engineers, contractors, and consultants. These varied groups can represent various perspectives, experiences, and incentives — a designated leader bringing them all together, united within a shared framework and working toward a common goal, is vital to the ultimate success of your project.

Without great teamwork, it is very difficult to reach a working consensus and achieve successful project outcomes. Teamwork, in turn, is built on routine communication that is both clear and thorough. A strong communications-based approach to leading a construction program should include, at a minimum, the following:

- Agreed-upon team goals at the outset of the project;
- A Management and Administrative Plan that identifies the lines of communication, defines the roles and responsibilities of team members, and outlines important project procedures;
- Regular team and stakeholder meetings during the design and construction phases to foster coordination and open communication;
- High-level reporting dashboards that enable “real-time” communications; and
- Anticipation of issues that could become problems and proactively work to resolve the issues.

Through this approach, it becomes possible for a project manager or other project leaders to develop a comprehensive plan that has the full buy-in of all stakeholders, team members, and end-users. Through clear, open communication and a consistent emphasis on teamwork that begins at the very start of a project, any challenges that are encountered, whether they are unique or generic in nature, can be responded to immediately, decisively, and in a fashion that incorporates the owner’s wants and needs while abiding by agreed-upon budgets and schedules.

3. Management of Diverse and Multi-disciplinary Teams

As previously mentioned, construction and development projects almost always contain many different team members from varying backgrounds and disciplines, who bring unique experiences, skills, and perspectives to the project. This wide-ranging diversity can be very challenging for a leader to manage over the course of a project. For example, how does one balance the expert opinion of Trade Person A with the expert opinion of Trade Person B, when their opinions, which may both be ‘correct,’ are at odds? How does one navigate disagreements between the architect and general contractor regarding the constructability of a certain design?

The best solution is to anticipate and resolve these conflicts before they happen, and to instill a transparent project culture that is based on open and ongoing dialogue where each team member’s input is valued and respected. Many of the challenges that come with managing diverse and multi-disciplinary teams stem from individual team members not feeling heard or appreciated — they have expertise and perspectives which they feel are being ignored or dismissed, which in turn can create resentment and a sense that their skills and experience are not appreciated.

An astute leader can avoid this scenario altogether by involving representatives from each discipline or trade in the conversation from the outset, and then continuing that conversation throughout the life of the project. By seeking and listening to the honest input of the different trades and subtrades, openly sharing information, and maintaining a dialogue about why certain decisions have been made, it becomes possible to do what is best for the project while preserving the trust and buy-in of the entire team.

The same is true when managing a project in diverse and/or engaged communities. Some projects, especially those in the public sphere, are constructed in highly charged political environments in which different groups or constituencies have different wants or needs. Effective project leaders will recognize the importance of engaging the community early on and develop a thoughtful, customized strategy to communicate with concerned citizens, stakeholders, and others who may be impacted by the project.

4. Team Member Empowerment

The most effective leaders know they can't do everything alone. More than that, they understand they need a strong team around them in order to be successful.

Building a strong team starts by selecting the most qualified talent, but it continues long after that in the way that a leader manages, motivates, and maximizes the talent of that team. By empowering team members to take initiative and be proactive, they can instill a collaborative environment where everyone is encouraged to contribute their expertise, solve problems, and make decisions that improve the team's performance and add value to the project's outcome.

The act of empowering team members requires having trust in their abilities and judgement, along with being

comfortable 'leading from behind' as others who possess more insight or expertise on a given topic step out front and lead the way. In a sense, a good leader achieves successful outcomes by giving everyone on the team an opportunity to be a leader in their own way.

Conclusion

Design and construction projects require strong leadership in order for the project team to reach its maximum potential. But all too often, decision-makers hold misguided ideas about effective project management leadership. It is easy to be impressed by a specialist with deep, specific knowledge in one area, or by the person who issues unilateral orders with unquestionable authority, and who exercises an iron grip on how things "should" be done, regardless of what others on the team may think. On the contrary, such leadership has many shortcomings and will fail to maximize the potential of both the team and the project.

Instead, seek out leaders who understand the entire design and construction process; who are trained facilitators and communicators with the diplomatic skills needed to engage, listen, and respond appropriately to better expertise wherever it exists; who are comfortable managing and motivating diverse and multi-disciplinary teams; and who empower the members of their team to be leaders themselves. This is real leadership, and it makes a real difference.





Jeff Birenbaum

Vice President | JBirenbaum@lehrercumming.com

Leading a cross-functional team of skilled project managers and owner advisors across New England, Jeff serves as Vice President at Lehrer Cumming, a wholly owned division of Cumming. Jeff is a well-respected industry leader with 23 years of experience on a wide range of project types, including high end residential, hospitality, mixed-use, among many more.