



# 10 Keys to Transforming From a Project Manager to a Project Leader

by Heath Suddleson, PSP

## 10 keys in brief

- \* You Need Your Team
- \* Empower Your Team
- \* Enable Your Team
- \* Avoid Organ Rejection
- \* Clarify Expectations
- \* Set Follow Up Points
- \* People Make Mistakes
- \* Provide Adequate Planning Time
- \* Provide Adequate Recharging Time
- \* Work to the Needs of the Project

**“Studies show many people take on supervisory roles around age 31, but don’t get leadership development until age 42.”**

## You Need Your Team More Than They Need You

Imagine trying to do everything on your project by yourself. You can’t be nearly as effective by yourself as you can be with a team working with you.

Of course that team working with you can leave for better offers or opportunities if needed. The question is why should they stay with you?

If the only reason they stay with you is the power of the paycheck, then you are not getting their best from them and you are only a job offer away from losing them.

If, however, they are inspired by you, encouraged by you,

### Empower Your Team

Have you ever held back or not taken the initiative because you were afraid of stepping on someone’s toes? If you have, then you were not empowered.

supported by you, and feel appreciated by you, then they are not only less likely to leave, but they are more likely to put in the extra effort.

When people are unhappy, they tend to do just enough to keep their job. When people are happy, they tend to put more passion into their job. When people feel appreciated they actually want to go the extra mile and give something back. Much of this stems from a simple perspective that you need your team more than they need you.

Leaders take the opportunity to communicate. Tell your team that they cannot step on your toes if your toes are not in their way. It’s much better to ask someone to pull



back than to have them hold back because they were afraid to take the initiative. People want to add value to everything they do, so let them.



## Enable Your Team

Now that your team knows they can go out and do great things, do they have the skills, training, and tools they need? Are there road blocks in their way?

The job of a leader is to provide the tools and remove the road blocks so that your team can do what they need to do.

Sometimes it is not having the right tools for the job that prevents the team from achieving their goals.

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**“ Having a bar of gold in your pocket is great, unless you’re trying to swim across a lake.”**

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## Invite Progress

All progress is change, and some of the most dangerous words ever spoken in a company on its way down are, “because that’s the way we’ve always done it”. Every industry changes over time and only those companies who can change will survive.

It happens in some companies that their own culture, which may have been the key to their success at one point, becomes the lock that prevents them from accepting sources of change.

I once worked for a company who used the term “organ rejection” to mean any mid-career hire who left after

Perhaps they are being asked to use a tool that is great for one aspect of the job, but is not a good fit for the job overall.

Having a bar of gold in your pocket is great, unless you’re trying to swim across a lake.

Sometimes it is the leader who is standing in the way of

success. This may be in terms of requiring too many approvals creating bottlenecks, or it may be in other aspects that cause the team to not fire on all cylinders.

In any case, provide the tools and remove the road blocks.



seeming to have trouble adapting to the company way.

There may have been valuable insights to be learned from someone “from the outside”. This mindset often caused projects to die. They never knew just how accurate this expression would turn out to be.

In the case of medical organ rejection, it is not the organ that fails, but rather the host body that rejects the organ. Despite specific medical testing and expert surgery,

the host body is still unwilling to work with a new team member. How true that is in our corporate cultures at times.

By inviting ideas and experiences from those who transition onto our teams, we ensure a constantly fresh supply of ideas, tools, and techniques. This makes all team members feel like they are engaged. Through this you can foster progress and innovation

## Clarify Expectations

Unless you have a team of clairvoyants who can read minds, it is up to you to ensure clarity of expectations.

What is it you want done?  
When must it be complete?  
What should it do? What should it look like? Who will receive this product?

Without a clear goal of what the end product should look like, how do you expect your team to create it?

Give your team the chance to ask questions and to paraphrase what they think you have asked them to deliver.

Look for opportunities to allow them to have some input into the work product. Giving them the chance for input will allow them to take ownership, which will in turn increase your chances of success.

Allow them to have input on how much time is needed

and what resources are required to perform this task. This will also establish ownership of the deadline which will increase the chances of project success.

Remember when clarifying expectations, to focus on the meanings and understandings rather than specific words. This is often the source of “heated agreement” within a team where two members seem to be arguing about the same understanding.




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**“this will increase ownership of the deadline which will increase the chances of project success.”**

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## Set Follow Up Points

Even if your expectations are perfectly clear and your team has bought in, you can still miss your deadlines and you can still deliver the wrong work product...unless you follow up at specified intervals.

When you assign the task, set appointments for at least two follow up discussions. These are opportunities for both the leader and the production team.

The leader can have the chance to check in without being nosy or overbearing. By asking simple questions of the team, the leader will have a good understanding of what progress has been made.

Similarly, the team members get the opportunity to engage the leader with questions and suggestions without seeming intrusive or appearing “needy”.

At any follow up point the leader and the team can assess how they are progressing against the desired deliverable and against the deadline. Has the team planned the work and are they working the plan?

The team can also assess if any additional resources or tools will be required to get the work done on time.

These follow up points should be scheduled based on the length of

the assignment. Short term or simple assignments may need only one follow up appointment where long term or complex projects may require regular standing appointments.

The follow up appointments may also be determined by how many times your team has done this task before. More experience may allow for less follow up.



## People Make Mistakes, and It's Okay to Make a Few Yourself

Of course we want the work done right, the first time. Zero Rework is the goal on every project. That may be our goal, but we must accept that mistakes will happen.

Would it surprise you to know that most of the cost and delay associated with rework is not due to a mistake being made, but rather it is due to a mistake being covered up? The more

teams try to hide the mistake to keep from having to answer for it the worse the situation becomes.

Therefore if we create the environment where our team can let us know immediately when a mistake is made, then we can immediately begin to take corrective action. This

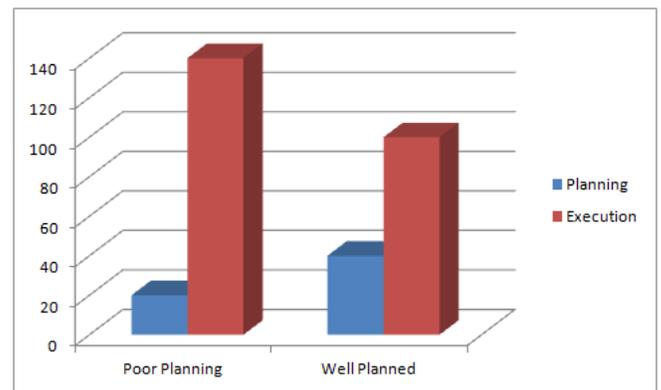
will reduce the cost and impacts of any mistakes.

Another benefit of creating this environment is that when you claim your own mistakes, the team will trust you more. This trust is the foundation to drawing a higher level of performance from your team. People are always willing to give more to people they

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**“People are always willing to give more to people they respect.”**

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### Provide Adequate Planning Time

My favorite excuse of all time is, “I’m too busy doing the work to plan it.” I can’t help but laugh every time I hear this because I know exactly where this project is headed.

Taking the time up front to plan out the work is crucial to allow the team opportunities to think through design or execution issues, consider intricate coordination points, and ensure that all tools and materials are on hand to do the work. This is not news, so why do we so often deny our teams the time they need to plan the work?

Going back to the concept of Zero Rework from the previous key, think about the cost of rework along these lines. Rework during planning consists of a few hours of time and some crumpled up paper. Rework during execution is typically much more costly possibly requiring the destruction of physical work product and more hours to correct the work.

Think about it this way, have you ever done a home improvement project where you were able to complete the task with only one trip to the hardware store?

If you think about how much time is lost with multiple trips to the hardware store, you begin to understand how just a little extra time up front in planning can save a whole lot of time in execution. In fact, taking a couple of extra days to plan can save weeks and months in execution reducing your overall time to execute the project.

It is that time in execution that is the most costly when lost and the most rewarding when saved.

## Provide Adequate Recharge Time

Since people are our greatest resource, we need to do what we can to preserve those resources. Too many people are working insane overtime hours and receiving little if any recognition. These people would leave their jobs today if another offer presented itself. Though not all are actively seeking offers from other companies, some are.

Think about it this way, if your team members were batteries, would you be treating them as rechargeable or disposable? Clearly, everyone would answer this “rechargeable”,

but do our actions reflect our answer?

When rechargeable batteries run low on power, we know they need time on the recharging station before they can be effective again. We know that just charging for five minutes may get us through a bind, but to get full function from our device we need to allow the batteries to recharge fully.

We even limit functions we use while the batteries are low. Why? Because with precious few bars of power showing, we want keep that power in reserve just in case we need something really

important. No games will be played, no pointless internet searches will be done, and certainly, unimportant phone calls will be cut short for fear of our battery dying an untimely death.

It’s amazing that we sometimes don’t treat our team members with the same reverence we show our electronic devices. We use people until they are drained of all power, and instead of giving them the chance to recharge, we demand even more. We ask them to perform fully after only a fraction of the required

charging time. We may even suggest that if they just give us all they have and more now, that we will give them extra charging time later, yet later seldom comes. Could you make that bargain with your batteries?

Since people are our greatest resource, it is in our best interest to see the warning signs before they become help wanted signs.

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**“it is in our best interest to see the warning signs before they become help wanted signs.”**

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## Work to the Needs of the Project

Managing a project is all about managing risk and the situations that create risk. There will be times on every project when something goes wrong and increases everyone’s risk on the project.

It may be something that is beyond the control of the parties involved such as a weather impact, civil unrest, or even unforeseen conditions.

It may be something that is caused by one party taking certain actions, or failing to act. The simple fact is that something will go wrong on

your project and it will need to be fixed.

Too often, this becomes a time of posturing. One party claims they had no fault in creating the problem and therefore will not act to fix it until blame is fully assigned. Perhaps they are even counting on charging the client for damages as a means to recover losses already incurred elsewhere on the project.

The simple fact is that no one can predict what the final outcome will be in terms of liability and settlements on

the project. Therefore it is better to always act as if it is your reputation and resources at risk.

If there is a way you can quickly fix or remedy the situation, then do it and the project will benefit.

When you increase the liability for one party on the project, you actually increase the liability for all parties on the project. Therefore, the converse is also true. By limiting the liability for one party on the project, you limit the liability for all parties on the project.

What do you gain by limiting everyone’s liability? You get trust, respect, and the recognition that you have everyone’s best interest at heart. This not only leads to a more successful conclusion to your current project, but it leads to the likelihood of future projects with this client.

After all, who would you rather work with? The person who drives the knife in, or the person who pulls it out?

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## Helping Managers Become Leaders

### Pulling It All Together

Clearly, there is much more than just ten simple keys to getting your team to fire on all cylinders. There is much you must do to transform from a Project Manager to a Project Leader.

The first step is recognizing the basics of how much you need your team and that your success depends greatly on their success. We often don't consider the term "Servant Leadership" in the corporate world, but it really is the key to effective leadership at all levels.

I began my leadership journey in the military, where people cannot leave a bad leader. I continued my

journey in the corporate world where it is difficult for people to leave a bad leader.

The most eye opening time in my leadership journey was when I started serving as a leader in volunteer organizations. In this environment it is all too easy for people to walk away from bad leadership. They are there for their own reasons and not those of the organization.

When you can get high productivity from a volunteer staff, imagine what you can do with a paid staff who have more time and incentive to perform.

It is for this reason that I encourage you to get involved in volunteer leadership opportunities. It can be in your community, place of worship, or politics. It can also be in trade associations and professional organizations like PMI, CSI, AACE International, AIA, ABC, AGC, ASCE, SAME, NSPE, IEEE, Toastmasters International, and so many others.

Not only will the organization benefit from your service, but so will your teams and most importantly, so will you.

These lessons and many others can be found in Heath's book, *The Attitude Check: Lessons In Leadership*.

The book can be purchased at any retail outlet, and autographed copies may be purchased on Heath's website [www.executiveachievement.com](http://www.executiveachievement.com)

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