

Project Managers as Leaders

Self-Assessment Can be Painful, But Well Worth the Journey

KEITH LYMORE

"It is not important what you are going to do, but what you are doing now."

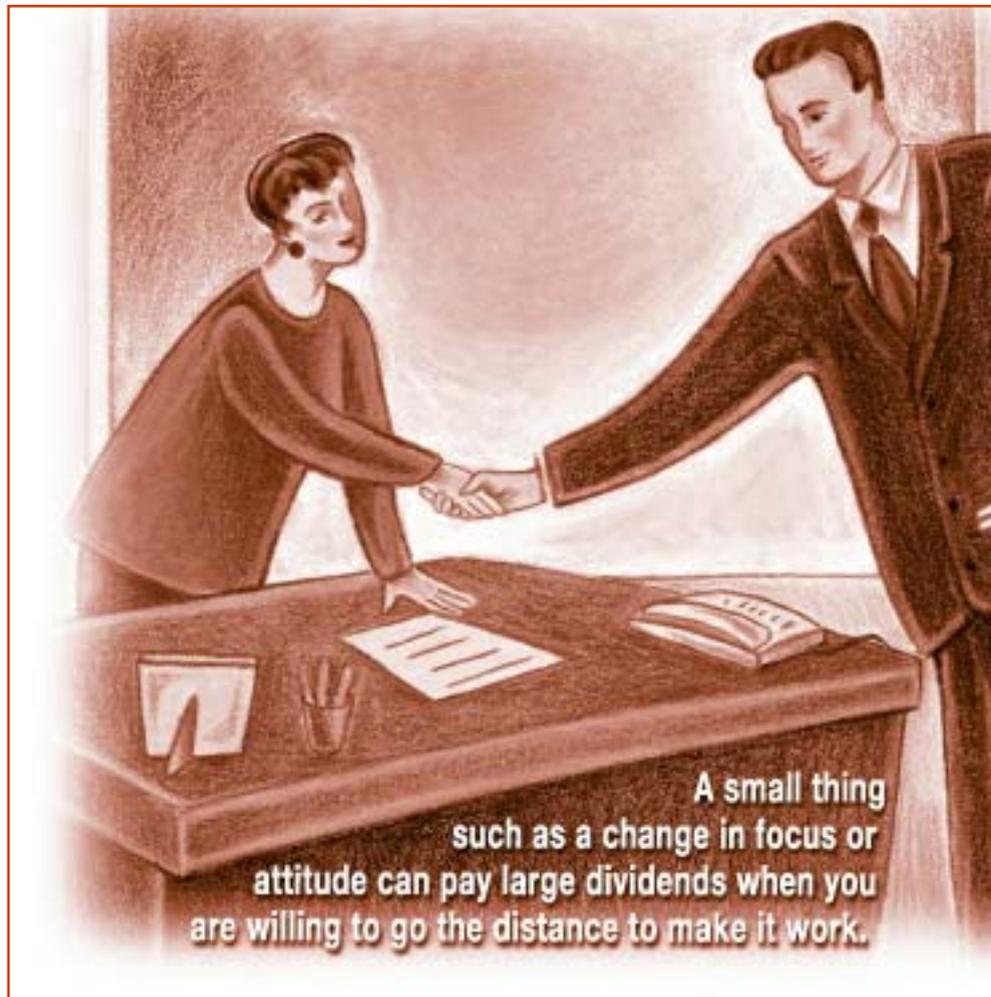
—Napoleon Hill

This article was written as part of the graduation requirements for the Advanced Program Management Course (APMC), at the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC), Fort Belvoir, Va. APMC is the Defense Acquisition University's premier acquisition course, and is the capstone course for new program managers. Fourteen weeks in duration, the course provides insight into new regulations, dissemination of new techniques from across the Services, and an opportunity to develop professional relationships with members from all three Services.

What Weaknesses?

Initially, the tasking to identify the weaknesses in my management style and then come up with a plan to resolve those weaknesses was a little overwhelming. Typically, very few among us are willing to admit that we even have any weaknesses, let alone trying to identify ways to improve upon them. So at this point I was floundering and searching for the life vest—*until* we began our study of Program Management and Leadership.

A key portion of the block of study was the Defense Project Manager Research Study (DPMRS), authored by Dr. Owen Gadenken, a professor of Engineering Management at DSMC. Gadenken's study included interviews with over 900 individuals. The individuals interviewed were program managers, functional managers, and project management ex-



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ecutives from various services at DSMC, the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), and the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT). Specifically, what intrigued me was the block that discussed attributes typical of the best PMs:

- Are strongly committed to their mission.
- Have a long-term and big-picture perspective.
- Are both systematic and innovative thinkers.
- Find and empower the best people for their project team.
- Are selective in their involvement in project issues.
- Focus heavily on external stakeholders.
- Thrive on relationships and influence.
- Proactively gather information and insist on results.

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"The greatest of all miracles is that we need not be tomorrow what we are today, but we can improve if we can make use of the potential implanted by God."

—Rabbi Samuel M. Silver

Steps to Success

Insight renewed, I began formulating and outlining my paper to incorporate attributes of the best program managers. As I worked to produce a final cut of



my paper, some attributes more than others seemed to cry out for attention. At this point, I decided that my paper would be a multifaceted effort, best approached by following six specific steps:

- In Step 1, I would seek out the author of the DPMRS to gain a better appreciation of what he had found.
- Step 2 would be to identify a couple of PMs on campus who have obtained

some measure of success and interview them about their careers. Admittedly, interviewing only one or two individuals on campus would in no way validate or invalidate the earlier results of the DPMRS. Through the interviews, I hoped to identify some of the attributes listed in Gadeken's study. By taking this step, I would be validating, in my own mind, that the attributes were valid.

- Step 3 would be a visit to DAU's Acker Library to review items already published by various authors on leadership, further augmenting my knowledge base on the topic of leadership.
- Step 4 would be to review my PROFILOR results to determine my personal strengths vs. weaknesses. The PROFILOR is a 360-degree instrument developed to provide feedback and development focus, as well as recommendations to individuals about their management skill strengths and development needs. Under the PROFILOR assessment, feedback surveys are completed by your superiors, peers, and direct reports.
- Step 5 would follow once I had a firm grasp of my strengths vs. weaknesses. I could then begin to develop a plan to, first determine how I can more fully leverage the strengths that I already exhibit; and second, develop a plan to strengthen my identified weaknesses.
- Step 6, the last step, would be to document the whole process and complete the assigned paper.

"Things turn out the best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out."

—John Wooden

Step 1

I began Step 1 by meeting with Gadeken, the primary author of the DPMRS. We had lunch and talked about the study and how he went about accomplishing it. Gadeken provided me with a number of additional articles, along with the digital files for some of the data from the DPMRS.

One article in particular, "Project Managers as Leaders; Competencies of Top Performers," *Army RD&A*, January-February 1997, discussed an article in the August 1988 edition of *Training* magazine.

Two researchers were trying to determine what makes University of Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant such a great coach. Instead of writing up their notes, they decided to watch him in action with his players. What they found was that he didn't do most of the things he alluded to in the interviews. However, they discovered other behaviors such as detailed observation of player performance and immediate feedback, which actually accounted for Bryant's successes.

Essentially, they found that "exemplary performers differ very little from average ones, but that the differences are enormously valuable."

For instance, last year a famous shooting guard in the National Basketball Association (NBA) was considered a spoiled, rich, ball hog who would never lead his team to an NBA Championship. Now, a year later, his praises are being sung from shore to shore, about how he led a team of unknowns to the brink of winning an NBA Championship. Upon investigation, little has changed over that year, except his *attitude*.

Last year, he would continually complain about the officiating, his teammates, his coach, and his off-court run-ins with the law. Then there were his tattoos, his hip-hop dress code, and his unorthodox training regimen.

Late last year, however, on the brink of being traded to another team, he realized that he needed to make a change or this would be the end for him. That same year, he dedicated himself to doing everything that his coach asked him to do—to be the first one at practice and the last one to leave each day; to stop complaining about the referees or his teammates; and to apologize for some of the things that he had said in the past.

This story had a somewhat happy ending. He played throughout the season with a long list of ailments, but never once gave into attacking the referees or others for his shortcomings. He became the Most Valuable Player of the league, and led his team to the championship series. Though his team did not win, the team did make it to a place no one ever thought they could reach.

I submit this was all possible because he decided to focus on how he could be a better teammate to his team, and thus the rest is history. A small thing such as a change in focus or attitude can pay large dividends when you are willing to go the distance to make it work.

"You begin to see obstacles when you lose sight of your goals."

—Author Unknown

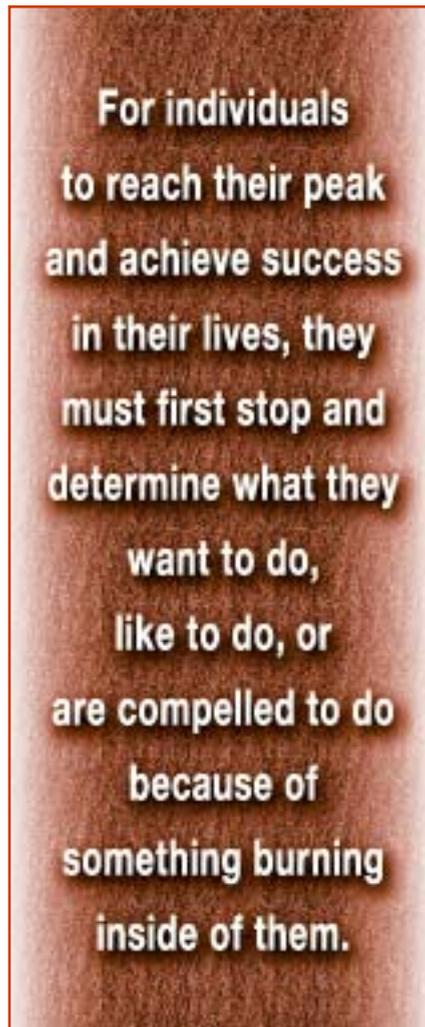
Step 2

Second, I continued to validate the attributes list by interviewing a couple of successful program managers on campus. Also, I took note of the presentation that Air Force Acquisition Center of Excellence Director Terry Little gave when he visited DAU as a guest lecturer.

The one key item uncovered in these encounters was *commitment*. This was a continuing theme throughout the discussions: *in order for PMs to perform at a high level, they must first know and understand what the mission is, and then "buy in" to the mission*. Without commitment, all you have are folks gathered together spinning their wheels and getting paid. If success occurs along the way, it is probably happenstance, and thus, cannot be replicated again.

Step 3

In Step 3, I reviewed literature from DAU's Acker Library to gain an additional data point that validated the attributes of the most successful program managers. One author of particular note was John C. Maxwell whose book, *Success Journey*, was quite interesting and informative, with a wealth of good information about how individuals can reach their peak and achieve success in their lives.



However, to reach their peak, they must first stop and determine what they want to do, like to do, or are compelled to do because of something burning inside of them. Once they decide what their mission in life is, to see it through to fruition they must commit themselves—as individuals—to that mission.

"Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds."

—Albert Einstein

Maxwell also discussed one particularly relevant acronym—**ROADMAP**.

- **R** stands for the need that we have to recognize our dream (mission) in life.
- **O** stands for observing our starting point; you need to know where you are currently in order to better understand how to get to your dream.
- **A** is for articulating a statement of purpose for your dream—how you are

going to realize it and make it come true.

- **D** is for defining the goals necessary to reach your dream and determining intermediate milestones to help keep you on track.
- **M** is for moving into action. For each 100 people that say they plan to do something, 67 will actually move beyond the talk stage, with 10 actually developing a detailed plan; however, only two will actually move out and execute the plan.
- **A** is for adjusting your plan based on new information or other changes that occur.
- **P** is for pointing to successes and celebrating at each of your interim milestones in order to keep "pumped up" and make it to the ultimate dream.

"It's what's learned and used, not what's taught that counts!"

—Unknown

Step 4

Step 4 is reviewing my PROFILOR results to determine what my strengths and weaknesses actually are. The DPMRS lists eight different attributes of the best PMs. Based on my PROFILOR results, I currently exhibit all eight of the attributes; however, the first five were more prevalent than the others. Obviously, the latter three attributes were the ones that I exhibited less.

"It's what you learn after you know it all that's important."

—John Wooden

Step 5

In Step 5, the strengths that I chose to emphasize more were Drive for Results, Motivate Others, and Provide Direction. The weaknesses that I chose to address were Coach and Develop, Champion Change, and Establish Plans.

Step 6

The last and final step—publication of this article.

Editor's Note: The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at Keith.Lymore@pentagon.af.mil.