

# PM Leadership: Seven Keys to Success

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**W**hat does it take to be a successful program manager? The Department of Defense has a tradition of successful program management, but where does leadership fit in this picture? While much has been written about leadership, there is some question about its application to program management and the PM. (I will use PM to include program, project, and product managers.) This article will explore the role of PM leadership as a critical link to achieving successful program outcomes.

## Leadership vs. Management

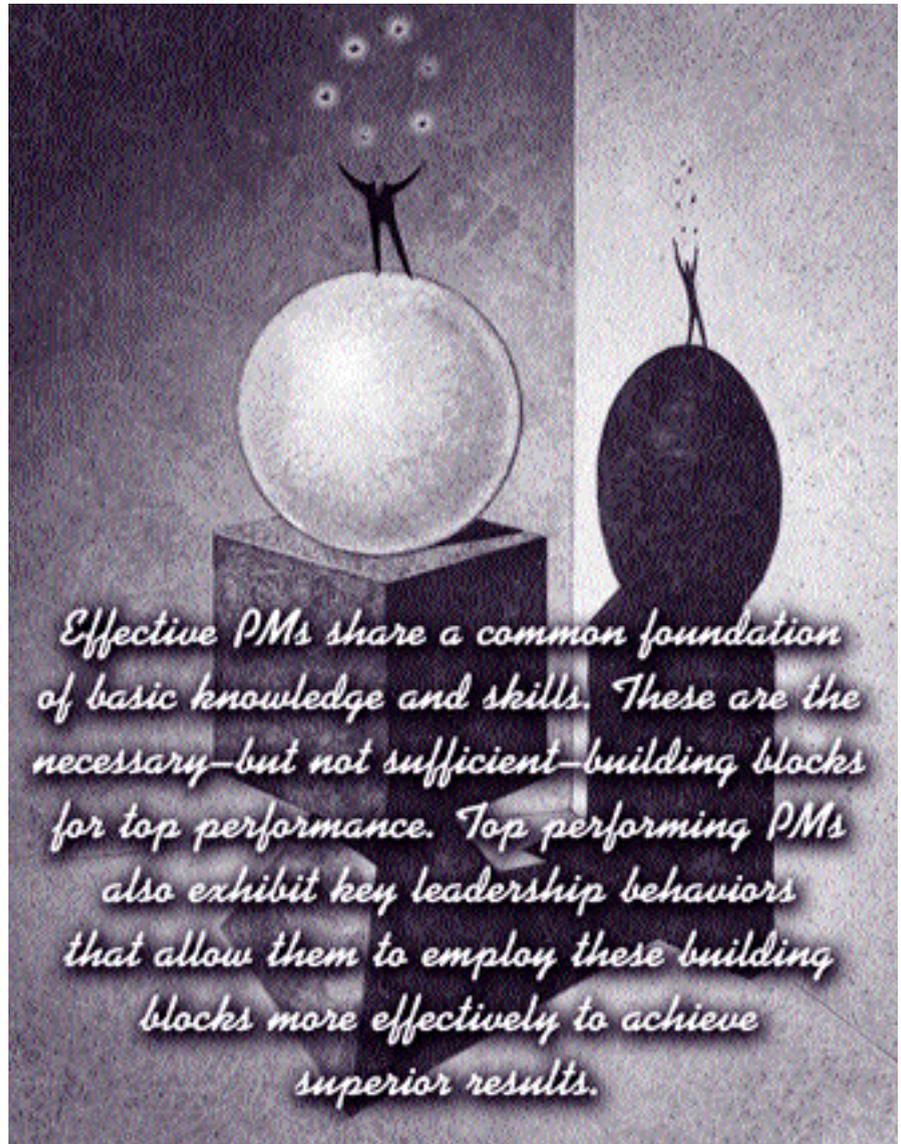
We often use the terms leadership and management interchangeably or without defining them. For this article, I have adopted the definitions used by former Harvard professor John Kotter in his classic *Harvard Business Review* article (December 2001) "What Leaders Really Do." According to Kotter, "leadership and management are two distinct and complementary systems of action. Each has its own function and complementary activities. Both are necessary for success." To Kotter, management is about coping with complexity, and it relies on fundamental skills of planning, organizing, and controlling; leadership is a broader concept that relies on setting strategic direction or vision, and motivating and empowering people to achieve it.

The challenge of relating leadership to the program management environment has driven the Defense Acquisition University, in its ongoing research, to define critical PM leadership competencies. This research, started in the late 1980s, now includes over 80 in-depth PM interviews

and over 350 responses to written surveys. The results are summarized here into the seven key leadership behaviors most frequently exhibited by successful PMs.

## PM Development Model

Before I discuss the leadership behaviors, I would like to put the concept of PM leadership in the proper context.



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Successful acquisition programs result from a combination of many contributing factors, some more controllable than others. Among the most controllable factors are the people who work on the program (the program office or integrated product teams) and how they are employed. Chief among the team members is the leader, who normally has the title of PM.

All members of the team, especially the PM, need a broad range of knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform their jobs. As a foundation, acquisition professionals need knowledge of the policies and fundamental technical and business disciplines that are part of the defense acquisition process. Such knowledge is normally gained through both academic education and job-related training. Then for each acquisition career field and specific job (such as program manager), the acquisition professional needs further knowledge along with management skills necessary to put the knowledge into practice. Finally, to become a top performer in the specific field, there are certain key skills and perhaps some inherent abilities that will invariably lead to top performance. A simplified view of this progression for the PM career field is illustrated in Figure 1. Knowledge forms the base with management skill above it and leadership behaviors at the top, all in a building block fashion.

This article is all about the leadership behaviors at the top of the triangle. At this point, one may question why these categories don't overlap and why there are leadership behaviors only at the top. The diagram is over simplified, and in reality the categories *do* overlap. However, based on the accumulated body of DAU research, the key attributes at the top triangle are leadership and, to some extent, management behaviors. While we expected to find a mix of knowledge, skills, and abilities at the top of the chart, only the leadership behaviors emerged in our actual studies. To put it another way, effective PMs share a common foundation of basic knowledge and skills. These are the necessary—but not sufficient—building blocks for top performance. Top performing PMs also exhibit key leadership behaviors that allow them to employ these building blocks more effectively to achieve superior results.

## Seven Key Behaviors

### 1. Choose your role

This is the first and most important behavior to become a successful PM leader. Most PMs are selected because

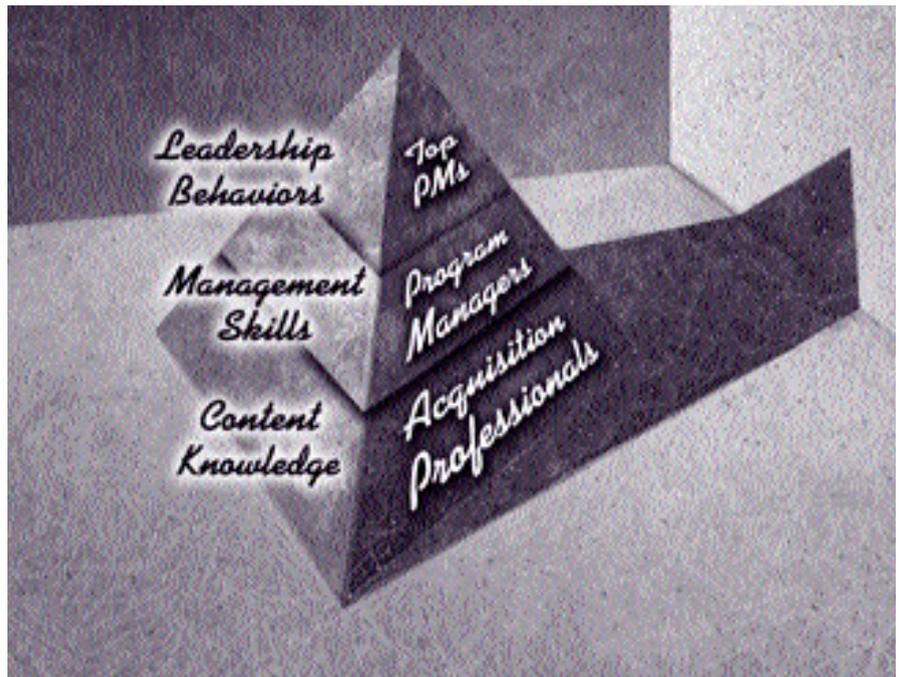


FIGURE 1. Development Model for a Successful PM

they have progressed and excelled through a series of technical and management jobs earlier in their careers. The temptation then is to approach the PM job with the same mindset that led to success in the past. In most cases, that is a mistake. While technical and management skills are wonderful building blocks for a PM, new skills are also needed for the new role. As one industry PM, now a corporate vice president, put it: “I had a job change where I was going to run a significant piece of a business. I kept thinking, ‘How am I going to change?’” The first question every PM should ask when taking on a new program is “What role must I play for this program to be successful?” In most cases, that role centers around leadership.

### 2. Own your program

A program manager's sense of ownership and commitment to the program carries over to the other members of the team. No one will follow a leader who doesn't believe strongly in what he or she is doing. As the industry PM quoted above went on to say: “You've got to behave as if you owned that job. If you're the program manager, you own that business. ... In a government program office, you've got a business to run. Well, you own that business. And when you've convinced yourself you own it, it will change how you behave and think.”

### 3. Set goals and act on them

A key function of PM leaders is setting the direction for their programs. Instead of spending time creating lofty vision and mission statements, the most successful PM leaders set clear and compelling goals and act on them. As one noted Missile Defense Agency PM put it: “What I've found to be successful is when you have a long-term

vision [and] you break it down into short term goals—visions that you can create that people can actually measure their progress against.”

#### 4. Think ahead and reflect back

As this Navy captain and successful PM leader said when he was confronted with a future shortage of canisters to ship and store his missiles, “We were heading to a point where, although it was years away from happening, things would start to diverge. But action needed to be taken right then and there, so that ... we would have enough canisters to go around and support the missile base. That was the driving factor in what I was doing.”

#### 5. Develop and empower your staff

With the sheer number and complexity of tasks, PM leaders can no longer rely on their skills as individual contributors. So as a PM leader, you must develop and empower your staff. This can be a new and hard-to-master skill for most PMs, but it often becomes the key that makes

or breaks you on the program. One very successful Air Force PM and now program executive officer has this to say about empowerment: “Ninety to 95 percent of the time, if people understand clearly what they’re supposed to do and achieve, they will go off and make it happen. Now they won’t if they believe that you’re going to come in and second guess them on everything. So you’ve got to trust them to do things. I don’t take all those electronics with me deliberately because I don’t want people to be able to reach me every second. I want them to know that I am off somewhere else and they’ve got to think through how to do their jobs. And I’ve found that that works very well.”

#### 6. Network

Recognizing the large number of stakeholders external to their organization, successful PM leaders thrive on relationships and influence. One highly successful Marine Corps PM and general officer says, “The most important thing when you come to Washington D.C., I tell people, is don’t burn a bridge down, and keep your Rolodex®. If you can’t do business by phone, you’re in deep trouble. ... If you can’t call somebody up and ask for a favor ... you’re in deep trouble.”

#### 7. Be open and honest

Finally, the foundation for each successful PM leader is personal credibility and integrity. Although often tempted by a system filled with politics and manipulation, the successful PM must be open and honest with others. Character and personal integrity are what make every other leadership behavior work. As the successful Air Force PM quoted above states: “I give people direct feedback, honest feedback; and I feel that in our system we don’t do that a lot. If I believe that a person is not taking the accountability and responsibility that I want, I tell him or her. I have found that’s often shocking to people. And many people, military and civilian, have told me I’m the only person they’ve ever had who would say, ‘This you did very well, [but] in this you did not meet my expectation.’”

Taken together, the seven keys to PM leadership (summarized in Figure 2) set the foundation for program success. What better way to start the new year, a new program, or new job than by working to develop these seven key behaviors that form the basis of success for PM leaders.

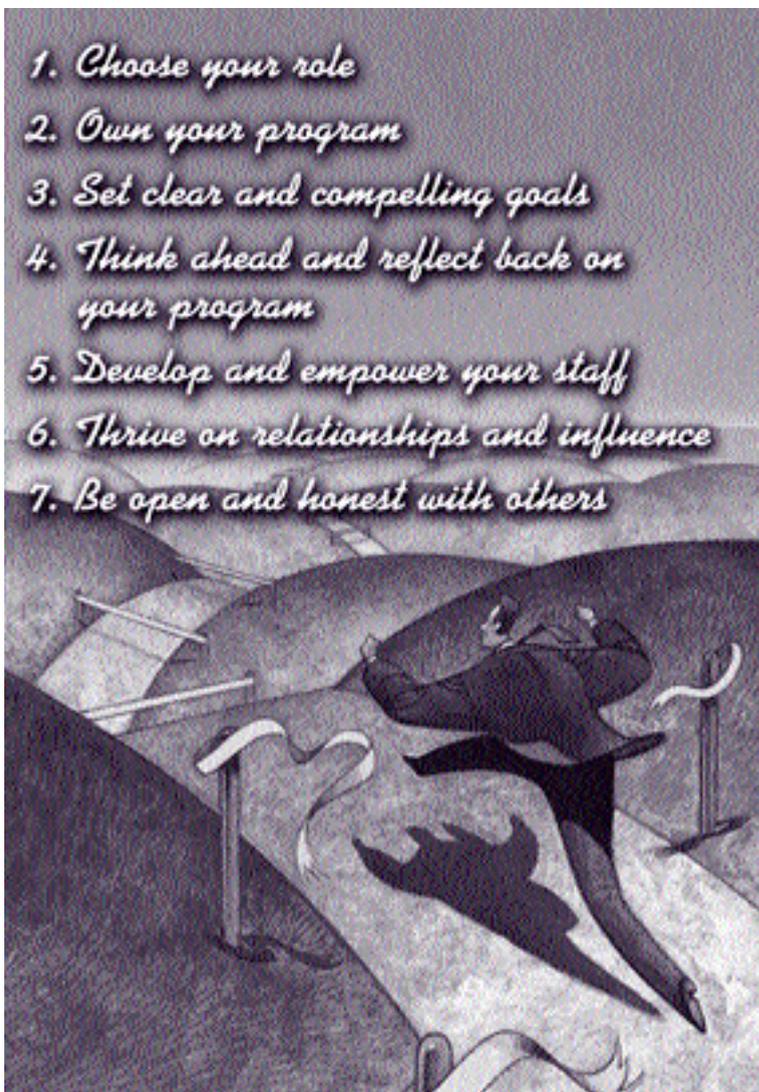


FIGURE 2. Keys to PM Leadership

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