Are You Too Soft?

> *A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He does not set out to be a leader, but becomes one by the quality of his actions and the integrity of his intent.*"
>
> —Unknown

It is my experience that most project managers are not willing to make the tough and unpopular project-related decisions, even though their instincts warn them that they are not taking the most effective action. These project managers are not leading their project teams to resolve their project's most important problems quickly. They frequently allow the project team to operate on consensus and what seems to please the most people—or to please the most vocal, influential people. To avoid or reduce conflict, they tend to make decisions that often are not in the best overall interest of the project.

Being *too soft* is demonstrating behavior that results in being consistently less effective than what is otherwise possible—and needed—in performing responsibilities.

Most project leaders are too soft most of the time.

Examples of project manager actions (or inactions) that are indicative of too-soft behavior include:

- Holding back from providing constructive criticism to project members
- Avoiding escalating project-related problems that are at an apparent impasse for resolution
- Being unwilling to passionately defend the *right* project plan to the project sponsor, executives, or client
- Behaving as if there is little or no authority to support responsibility
- Putting off insisting on and driving good project management practices throughout the project
- Loosely inspecting what is expected from others
- Delaying asking for help when needed

- Being lax in holding project members accountable for their commitments and actions
- Complaining rather than constructively working issues to closure
- Taking on too much work instead of assigning tasks to the appropriate project members
- Being remiss in seeking out and obtaining needed project management training of both hard and soft skills
- Avoiding taking a position on an issue out of fear of alienating project members
- Avoiding or excessively delaying making key decisions
- Focusing predominantly on other than the top three problems.

If you routinely exhibit these types of behaviors, then you are too soft—you tend to take the easy way out rather than do the right thing by demonstrating effective behavior. If you only occasionally slip into this behavior, then that may not be serious cause for alarm.

Project success is about *results*—delivering a product that satisfies the customer and offers the organization an appropriate return on investment. The project manager's job is to lead the project's members in the pursuit of a successful project and product. In most cases, a project's success is directly related to the impact the project manager had on the project team throughout the project.

> *Project success is about results, not just effort.*

The most effective project managers behave as if they are running their own business. They believe—and their actions demonstrate—that *the buck stops here* and that they are fully accountable for the project. They must make and be accountable for many decisions, and they frequently and respectfully draw upon the knowledge, experiences, and insights of those around them so that they make the most informed decisions. But they are careful not to rely too heavily on consensus management; they recognize their duty to be fully accountable for the outcome of the project. This can mean that the most effective project managers will at times stand alone with what they believe to be the right decision.

> *The best project leaders are "the-buck-stops-here" accountable.*

Avoiding being too soft doesn't mean you have to be rude, insensitive, abrasive, arrogant, or a bully. None of these attributes is acceptable—ever! On the contrary, an effective project manager must strive to demonstrate behavior for others to model. For example, make yourself available and approachable to coach and support others through their problems and setbacks, be a constructive catalyst when change or a given action is required, and demonstrate respect and dignity for all project members. It is not about finding fault or making someone feel

uncomfortable; it's about helping the project's members and encouraging them to help each other so that the prevailing attitude is that *we all are successful together*.

> *Project leaders that demonstrate too-soft behavior are performing a disservice to all stakeholders.*

If you believe that too-soft behavior will win friends and influence others, don't go there! It will have the opposite effect long-term. Those around you will lose respect for you as a leader, your project's outcome will be negatively impacted, and your career can become stagnant—or even shortened.

If you have difficulty making unpopular decisions, if you allow what others think about you to be more important than what you think about yourself, if you follow the "squeaky wheels" around you rather than your own inner compass . . . then you might not

> *Anyone can learn to be an effective leader—if they choose to.*

be ready to be an effective and successful project manager. But don't despair. Almost all project managers who perform their roles effectively today had these challenges to overcome yesterday. You too can persevere if it is important to you and you take the initiative to make things happen.

Let's Talk: Questions & Answers

Q8.1   *You assert that most of us as leaders are too soft most of the time. Why is this?*

A8.1   There are many reasons. For example: Many of us have never seriously focused on the too-soft issue so it has escaped our attention; many of us are afraid of alienating others and concerned that people will not like us; we don't understand our job well enough to realize that it's about results, not a popularity contest; and we are concerned that tougher behavior will burn bridges and be career-limiting.

Although it helps to understand why we may be too soft so that we can be more deliberate in correcting our behavior, *why* we may be too soft is never an excuse for performing ineffectively. What matters is that we, as leaders, take accountability for our performance and drive ourselves and our stakeholders to achieve the needed results.

Q8.2   *Can you elaborate on your example of too-soft behavior that especially resonates with me: "Evades taking a position on an issue out of fear of alienating project members"?*

A8.2   Here's an example.

> *I am mentoring a project manager I will call "Mike." Occasionally I shadow him for the day while he performs his duties. We*

are early heading to a meeting one afternoon when we encounter two of Mike's team leaders in the hallway discussing an issue. The issue has to do with a disagreement they had among themselves and they were not making any headway in resolving it—an issue that would harm the project if not resolved fairly quickly. We joined them to understand the issue.

A short while later, Mike motions to me that we have to leave to get to the meeting on time. I observed that Mike had remained quiet throughout the encounter as the frustrations between the two team leaders were reaching a boiling point. I ask Mike why he didn't join the discussion to help it to an appropriate resolution. Mike said that if he voiced his desire, then he would have alienated one of them. He explained that he tries his best not to get anyone upset with him. I shared with Mike that he obtained a worse outcome: Both are upset because Mike demonstrated behavior that is too soft—he didn't demonstrate the leadership, the backbone, required to help bring the issue to an acceptable resolution.

Mike's job as a project manager is to facilitate, when necessary, such problems so that they can get resolved reasonably quickly and with an acceptable outcome. More times than not, project members can accept a decision; what they cannot accept is inaction and indecision. On the off-chance that Mike's decision would have alienated one of the team leaders, that was not a valid reason for Mike to refrain from appropriately addressing the issue. Again, the reason why we may be too soft is never an excuse for performing ineffectively.

Q8.3   *Would you say that being too soft is a major contributor to project failure?*

A8.3   Let me make this absolutely clear. It is my experience that the No. 1 reason project managers—and all leaders—fail is that they are too soft. The No. 1 reason *projects* fail is that we don't effectively manage to the top three problems. (See Chapter 28, Manage to Your Top Three Problems.)

> *The No. 1 reason project managers fail is that they are too soft.*

Q8.4   *Your list of too-soft behaviors is daunting. There don't seem to be many people who can live up to the expectations you are placing on project managers.*

A8.4   Most of us have been guilty of being too soft at some point in our careers. I know I have. That's okay. All of us are works in progress. What's not okay is when we do not learn from ineffective past behavior and apply those lessons going forward.

It's not that I have raised the bar too high for what's expected of a project manager; it's that the bar needs to be that high for consistently effective behavior.

If you look around you and identify the people you respect the most as effective leaders, you will see the role-model behavior that I am talking about. These leaders have learned how to be effective—how to make things happen. From my experience over the years, I know that some of you reading this are already performing at the raised-bar level.

Q8.5 *What is your take on empowering yourself?*
A8.5 "Empowerment" is an overused word these days, but an underused concept.

Empowerment is understanding your job, taking ownership of your job, and doing whatever is necessary—within legal and ethical parameters—to accomplish that job.

All too often I hear, "I have all the responsibility, but I don't have the authority!" The problem is that most of us do not *take* the authority. We do little more than grab the tip of the iceberg of authority, of behaving boldly. When was the last time your boss (resource manager) called you on the carpet for exceeding your authority? Most people cannot remember a time. If you can, and you did nothing illegal or unethical, then you are to be applauded.

Q8.6 *What is your take on empowering others?*
A8.6 New leaders commonly resist giving up some of their "power" by empowering others—giving them full responsibility and accountability for key tasks. They often believe that they can do the job better or faster themselves, or fear giving others too much work. They also allow society's work ethic—being independent and self-reliant—to interfere with their duties as a leader of others. Resist these attitudes and transfer some of your work, some key tasks.

> ❝ *No man will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself, or to get all the credit for doing it."*
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> —Andrew Carnegie,
> American industrialist and philanthropist

A successful leader knows that he or she achieves goals through the dedication, skill, and efforts of others. You must learn to work with others in ways that allow them to grow and achieve their dreams. After all, you appreciated the opportunities that others gave you to learn. Give others their chance as

well. Doing so is good for you and good for your team members.

Empowering others frees you to lead and frees them to learn.

Q8.7 *As a project manager, I feel I have difficulty being decisive. Any thoughts on this?*

A8.7 Your project members react to your actions. When you delay making crucial decisions, you also delay the time that will be needed to implement those decisions. Many projects and organizations have the capacity to increase their productivity and effectiveness. By putting off decision-making, you are not driving your team efficiently. If you delay your own decision-making, you are also preventing the next tier of decisions from being made. This decision queue can build to a point where progress within the project is seriously affected. The result is a sluggishness that spreads throughout the project—and that only you, the project manager, can correct.

> 66 *Once the WHAT is decided, the HOW always follows. We must not make the HOW an excuse for not facing and accepting the WHAT."*
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> —Pearl S. Buck, American novelist

It's better to make decisions early—when their pain and cost to the project are relatively minor, yet when they can have a major, long-term, positive effect. Some decisions will, in hindsight, prove to be less than the best. However, if you wait until absolutely no risk remains before taking a position on a problem, then you will lose all competitiveness.

Q8.8 *As a project manager, I am the busiest person on the project. When members whine about taking on duties or action items that are within their domain of responsibility, I often step in and perform them. The result is that I am working a lot of overtime, facing burnout, and am even considering giving up being a project manager. Any advice?*

Project managers should avoid becoming a project's critical path.

A8.8 You have set yourself up to be the critical path on the project. Instead of being the critical path, you should be free to help navigate others who are on the critical path. You need to hold others accountable for performing their work. If they need

> help, then work to obtain that help, but do not take on their duties.

Q8.9   *Can you expand on the positive behaviors we should embrace to overcome the negative behaviors listed?*

A8.9   Many of the behaviors you seek are the focus of chapters in this book. These include:
- Chapter 2: Are You a Benevolent Dictator? You Should Be!
- Chapter 3: Ask for Help—or Become Part of the Problem
- Chapter 5: Is Your Professional Behavior Respected?
- Chapter 10: Turn Criticism into an Asset
- Chapter 14: Duties of the Effective Project Manager
- Chapter 18: Are You Learning from Project to Project?

More information about too-soft behavior is available in another one of my books. If you're interested, see Chapter 15, Are You Too Soft? in *The Enter*Prize *Organization: Organizing Software Projects for Accountability and Success* (Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, Inc., 2000). © 2000, Project Management Institute, Inc.