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Influence without authority – what say do you have as a project leader?

Influence without authority

One of the characteristics of managing projects is that the project leader does not generally have any hierarchical authority, the so-called official authority. In other words, you officially have nothing to say, for example, in the choice of a member of the project team, although you may need this person, and you have no say in the composition of your team. This situation does not make it easy for you, because you have to achieve your goal even if you have limited resources in order to do so. You will have to bring something else into the equation, therefore, to ensure that you'll reach your goal effectively. Due to the fact that in many cases you have little or no official authority, it is easier to achieve your goal by bringing influence to bear – and I call that influence without (official) authority.

We're going to take a look at how you get on with influence. Do you have any influence at all? What can negotiating and networking produce for you? How can you influence decisions? What's the status with the interests of different parties? In other words, as project leader, how can you take effective decisions and bring influence to bear on the relationship?

INFLUENCING THE DIVERSITY IN YOUR TEAM

The organisation of a project is a temporary set-up and it's therefore important that the project leader takes the special nature of this argument into account. In many instances, project teams are made up of employees from different departments, companies or disciplines. This means that most of the time they are people who come from different backgrounds, and who have different areas of knowledge and experience. Differences in culture can also play a role here. It is becoming increasingly common for projects to be

organised outside national borders, with multi-disciplinary teams made up of participants from various different countries and cultures. This diversity will have an influence on the atmosphere and the co-operation and will affect the way the project is organised, and it may take some time before the different members are able to understand each other. Tips that may help you avoid this time lag, look at:

- How people speak to each other.
- How they perceive the project leader.
- How they deal with mistakes and faults.
- How they deal with conflicts.

Taking differences into account and being able to deal with them effectively is not an excessive luxury but an important instrument for project leaders to help them carry out their project effectively. So:

- Recognise and make use of differences by actively inviting the members of your team to participate in team activities.
- Modify procedures where necessary according to the way different situations need to be dealt with (or communicated) by treating these differences with respect.
- Always check which behaviour and way of operating will work when it comes to reaching the goal.
- People will allow you to influence them (and thus allow you to lead) as long as there is respect – so the example you set in terms of behaviour is decisive.

INFLUENCING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

I don't really want to go into detail about different specific cultural problems within project teams in this book. (If you are interested in cultural diversity and how you can deal with this in business situations, you will find several books on this in the list of further reading.) However, I do think that it's important to say a few words about this, as more and more companies are affected by it and an increasing number of projects are set up across international borders. In addition to the differences between people – the way they work, their behaviour as well as their skills and qualities – you also need to take into account different cultural backgrounds if you have a multicultural team. It would be inappropriate to adopt an attitude of: 'This is a local project and I see no need to change it, the others will simply have to adapt'. You might think this is a healthy form of arrogance, but this type of behaviour will only lead to your project running into delays, miscommunication and misunderstandings, and tasks either not being completed or not being done well enough. It makes more sense, therefore, to take these differences into account and to manage them effectively. Here are a few tips about dealing with cultural differences.

- Empathise with the culture of the other person, recognise and respect it. This does not mean that you should just accept it wholesale, but that you should show respect for the other person's culture: something that you expect the other person to do automatically when it comes to your own culture.
- Think about how to communicate. An open way of communicating and giving direct feedback is not appreciated in all countries.
- Be aware that in some countries it is unusual for people to admit that they have not completed a certain task; they may say that this is due to reasons beyond their control. It's important to think thoroughly beforehand about how you want to tackle this situation without causing embarrassment.
- How are agreements interpreted? In some countries signing a contract or project plan is just the start of doing business, while in other countries the agreement or the document are considered to be binding.
- How is conflict dealt with? How can you sort out sensitive issues? In some situations it may be advisable to bring in official mediators.
- Are there any specific problem areas within the relationships that need to be dealt with? (Cultural traditions, for instance: do you shake a woman's hand and are women accepted in the role of project leaders who take decisions?) Sometimes it is simply more sensible to pick someone else as the temporary project leader – if necessary – for official meetings rather than sticking to a single project leader. If you know that someone with grey hair will have more effect, why not make use of this information? It's always about reaching your goal. Sometimes you will simply have to try different things.

The most important advice I have is that you should agree on the rules of the game for communicating (how do you want people to speak to you?) and about carrying out tasks (how can you go back on agreed arrangements without losing face?). Be aware that the way you think and act is not necessarily appropriate in other cultures. The way you behave, the respect you demonstrate for differences and your ability to use these to good effect can work to your advantage.

Right, we've gone into some depth about the fact that your team is made up of different people, possibly from different backgrounds. It's important that you're aware of these differences so that you can deal with them. If you have a multicultural team, you'll need to use a great deal of tact in your dealings with them.

Dealing with power

We noticed earlier that project leaders usually find themselves in a position where they have a lot of responsibilities and very little official authority – as is the case, for instance, in a relationship between a manager and the person who reports to that manager.

A project is a temporary activity, where temporary leadership and the temporary execution of tasks are carried out by temporarily appointed people. Structures where project leaders end up managing the same people are very rare and generally involve difficult conflicts of interest. It's important for companies to check how great a potential project leader's ability is to bring influence to bear, in order to reach the targeted goal is when making their choice. Influence without official, hierarchical, authority..

WHAT IS AUTHORITY?

Authority is a loaded word and when we talk about authority it very often arouses strong emotions. For a lot of people 'authority' is a dirty word, and some think of it as a bad thing. This is a neutral description of the concept of authority: authority is everywhere, obvious and can be viewed as both positive and negative.

Authority crops up wherever you come across people working together, whether they're in work situations, working on a project or at home in a family. Wherever people have to work together there's influence at work. Authority is also self-explanatory. One example is the authority between a parent and a child, another is authority at school; clients have authority, etc. The negative aspect arises when authority is abused in order to get someone to do something against their will. Authority doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing, per se; it takes on weight depending on how it is used. One possible definition of authority could be the following, by A.v. Servellen: 'influencing or affecting the behaviour, thoughts and emotions of the other person.'

Everyone brings influence to bear, whether consciously or subconsciously. Everyone sometimes has authority (or influence). This is defined by relationships of authority. Authority can be exercised in a number of different ways:

- Official authority: the rights and duties that are linked to a certain job – with a mayor or a company director, for instance.
- Sanctioning authority: the person in authority has access to certain resources. They can reward or punish. Managers, for instance, often determine their employees' salaries or whether they will receive a bonus by holding appraisal discussions.
- Reference authority: this type of authority relies on the 'pulling' authority of certain groups that people want to belong to. There are often implicit rules, which may apply to clothing (in certain companies a formal suit is de rigueur) or attitude (in some companies mistakes are not spoken about) or behaviour (people are usually polite to each other).
- Professional authority: knowledge is authority. This form of authority is based on the difference in knowledge, professionalism, experience and skill. Respect for the knowledge that the people in question have gives them authority. Examples are people such as professors, specialists, etc.

Project leaders will usually use professional authority because in their role they have neither official nor sanctioning authority. Their influence, therefore, is relatively restricted and the project leader will have to earn respect in order to be accepted as a leader. Setting an example and actively involving the members of the team in decisions and activities are among the options that will help to achieve this.

A lot of people do not find reference authority attractive, and it usually involves implicit rules of behaviour that are not in employment conditions. If someone is new in a company or is working with a multi-disciplinary team it is very important to discover all the details very rapidly so that you can hold your own within the company or the project.

YOU AND AUTHORITY

Being a project leader also involves different sorts of authority – from your client, the organisation that you work for, your team – and you will also find yourself facing implicit rules of behaviour. If the dominant culture is one where people are careful in their dealings with each other and do not talk about results and mistakes, it's important that you adapt your way of communicating to fit in. If you are normally accustomed to communicating openly and directly and are comfortable giving feedback, this type of company may see that as being threatening and may find it unwelcome. Many people find the pressure of implicit rules and the authority that this produces as annoying and try to oppose it; resistance or opposition are both expressions of this.

Be aware that, as project leader, you are always a thorn in the side of the organisation. In general, projects are seen as an interruption in daily business. The activities that emerge from a project normally come on top of everyday tasks and staff have to set priorities when carrying out their tasks. Not everyone is always overjoyed about this. It's vital to bring influence to bear in such a way that it is accepted and, above all serves your needs.

INFLUENCE THROUGH LOBBYING AND NETWORKING

You might want to try influencing the perception of a project in cases where a company feels particularly threatened by it or does not see the need for it. You can do this by networking and lobbying. The aim of both is to obtain and build support.

Lobbying is mainly intended to generate enthusiasm among people so that they support your ideas. This is particularly important when you know that you are going to come up against resistance to certain activities and you need support in order to reach your goal. In these instances, it's a case of emphasising the positive aspects of your proposal. After all, why would anyone offer their support if there were no advantages in doing so?

Here's an example. Your project will involve a drastic change in a software programme that will have a considerable impact on the users. In this situation it would be wise to talk to a large number of users informally about what they think about the possible changes. Putting them in the know about the plans may result in some good suggestions that you can use for solving problems or anticipating eventual problem areas. By pointing out the advantages of the changes and by taking the (eventual) complaints seriously you will generate the support you need, both for yourself and for your project. This way, you'll ensure that you talk with as many of the people involved as possible, you'll be exploring and looking carefully at how people feel about your initial proposals, and you'll be able to take their concerns into account. You will be paying attention to their wishes and trying to bring your arguments in line with theirs.

Networking is something that is particularly useful when you want to expand your own horizons by exchanging thoughts with like-minded people, and come up with new ideas and make contacts that may come in useful at some point in the future. Take note: professional networking is about giving and taking. You have to take personal responsibility, therefore, not just for asking for advice and discussing your own problems but also for supporting the other party, encouraging them and sharing your own expertise and specialised skills. You can, for example, choose to get in touch with other project leaders so that you can exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Now for an example of this. You haven't been working very long in your company and have been given an important project to handle. Go and network with older colleagues who will be able to tell you a lot drawn from their own experience, both about the pitfalls you might experience and about who could help you in a specific situation. Perhaps you could teach them something about new ideas that you have picked up during your studies or work experience too. Outside your company, you can work on particular issues that you would not be able to broach so easily within it: asking for help in specifically difficult situations, for example. You may have a preference for discussing this with people who are not colleagues – 'If I ask too many questions they will think I am incompetent' – although there are no stupid questions. You may also prefer to test what others think about certain issues, or even use this option if you just want to state clearly how fed up or frustrated you are by your project, without it having direct repercussions.

Effective networking can generate new energy because you can talk with like-minded people about issues that are bothering you, or about any that you have questions about, and they know exactly what you mean.

As you can see, project leaders can have quite a lot of influence. The knack is in finding the right way to use it so that it delivers the results you want!

Interests

We've covered the subjects of influence and authority, but we haven't yet talked about interests as an issue. What I have noticed is that little attention is paid to different interests in projects, and yet we are all involved in these interests. Not dealing with interests in the right way can result in us not reaching our goals, or reaching the goal but doing so at the expense of others.

When I looked up 'interest' in my dictionary, I came across the following partial definition: *'Something that is advantageous to...'*

An interest is something that produces a benefit of some kind. I can see that the interest of the client is sometimes very closely defined, and the interest of the project leader is also clear. But how about the interests of the members of the project team? Have you thought about the fact that they may each have personal interests and that these are not necessarily going to be the same as yours? Let's look at an example:

- The interests of the project leader may be to achieve an excellent project result, so that he or she has a greater chance of an attractive career move.
- The interest of the client could be that this project will make it possible to save money.
- The interests of the people in the project team may be to make as little effort as possible in order to carry out their activities.
- A common interest may be that everyone benefits from seeing that the company is able to operate healthily over the next five years, so that they are all guaranteed a job.

The question is whether you – as project leader – should be looking after the interests of the members of your project team. I think you should, because you should not take it for granted that they will automatically co-operate and work on your project. Nor should you assume that they will be prepared to work overtime just because you ask them to do so with such charm. No, generally they will put extra effort into tasks because there's something in it for them, and because it is therefore in their interest to do so.

MY INTERESTS AND THEIR INTERESTS

Something I see with regularity is people trying to convince each other with arguments, and this can go on eternally without producing any satisfactory results. I call it intellectual ping-pong:



Here's an example:

Peter I think we shouldn't use that new software system in our project because it hasn't been fully tested and will cost us extra time.

John I think that we absolutely should use it, because the project will run much more smoothly with it.

Peter: But people are already fed up with all the changes...

John: Yes, but our company wants us to progress and not stagnate...

Neither is really listening to the other and both of them could probably go on for quite some time like this, trying to repeat arguments in order to win the other person over to their point of view. The question is whether it will work this way, and I don't think it will. Unless, of course, one or the other admits that they're too tired to go on listening to the other, or thinks 'I'm never going to convince him anyway' and so gives up. In general, the more one person tries to convince another that he or she is right, the harder the other person will stick to his or her guns.

THE WINNING STRATEGY

Here's another example. As project leader, it is in your interest to complete the project within budget, and you notice that Will, one of the members of your team, regularly goes over budget. You can try to convince Will by adopting a tactic of the law of the jungle or winning at the expense of others, and there is a strong risk that he will interpret this in the way he wants so that he can do what he thinks is right. An alternative is to go for a compromise – complaining and imagining the next conversation when your client is not very happy with the state of affairs: 'You see, we should have just done so and so.' You could try to reach a win/win situation in which both parties choose the best solution and are happy with it: you satisfy your wish to stay within budget and you make Will happy by giving him a certain amount of freedom to do what he wants.

These choices, for instance, could be that you look into the possibility of getting the client to increase the budget, you decide together if there is room for manoeuvre and you look into how you can be clever with your budget. But do beware: this could be the kind of compromise that leaves a bad aftertaste because the solution wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

This option means applying the following principle: it is assumed that it is in the interest of both parties to create an acceptable solution for the sake of the relationship. Let's be honest, if you win and the other person loses the relationship has been damaged because nobody likes to lose. And compromises are not always constructive because both parties feel that they have had to give up something.

AND HERE WE ARE BACK TO RELATIONSHIPS AGAIN...

If you have no interest in the relationship and have no need of the other person in the future you can easily choose the first option: you push your opinion through irrespective of what the other person thinks or wants. You win. But aware of the impact that this will have if you ever need this person again in the future; the incident will be etched in their mind for ever.

You are buying your dream car. You squeeze the dealer dry because you're going to have the maintenance handled by an independent garage. The relationship here is of no interest to you. Are you sure about this? Think about those unique spare parts... You can also choose a second option: add a bit of water to your wine, if you like. It may not win a competition, but sometimes a compromise might be the best thing you can do and that makes it acceptable. So you buy your dream car from the dealer and give it to someone else for the maintenance. During negotiations, you reach a compromise: you get the fancy tyre rims but drop your demand for a decent sound system. The dealer would have preferred to have made more profit out of you and you are only partially happy, but it was the only realistic option left.

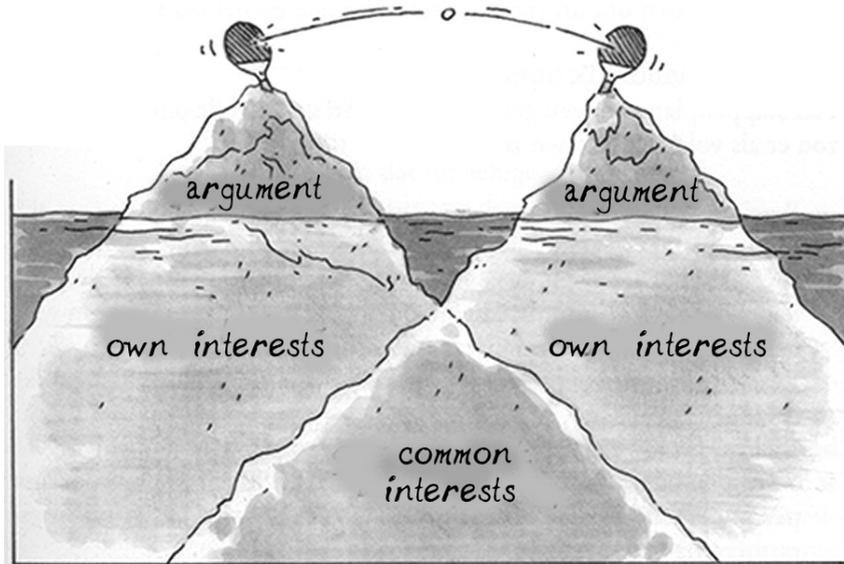
Translate this into your project. The interest for you is great – you have to achieve your goal, and the relationship is important because you need the members of your team in order to achieve those results, so option three is what I recommend: you act in the common interest – carrying out the project within the set deadline and with the resources and people you need. By doing this you ensure that you satisfy everyone's individual interests (as far as possible) by giving members of your team room to take initiative and personal responsibility.

What we're talking about here is that you serve your own interests as well as those of other people, and by serving the common interest you are able to achieve your ultimate goal. The way to do this is by negotiating.

It is an extremely important skill, because in your role and position you do not have the official authority to force people to do things. What's more important is the fact that even if you did have the official authority to force your will on people or to push something through, it would be at the expense of the relationship. As project leader you are dependent on others to achieve your goal, so it makes sense to do this and still maintain your relationship with them.

ACHIEVING YOUR GOAL WHILE MAINTAINING YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Without wanting to create the illusion that you can become a fully-fledged negotiator just by reading this chapter, I would like to give you a few suggestions. I am going to use the so-called iceberg model:



We have already seen that using arguments (1) to convince people is not a very fruitful exercise. Looking after your own interests (2) and wanting to dominate negotiations usually turns into a win/lose situation. Who says that your interests are more important than those of the other parties? You win at the expense of the others, and the relationship has gone down the drain. If you want to (and are in a position to) take a good decision whereby you maintain the relationship – in other words, you look after the common interests (3) – you will need to explore the following points before embarking on negotiations:

- Where do my interests lie?
- Where do the interests of the other parties lie?
- Is there a common interest?

If you do have a common interest, it is possible to look constructively at the situation and see what options you have. If there are good intentions on the part of both parties, then the first step in getting out of a stalemate and reaching your goal has already been taken.

HOW CAN I NEGOTIATE SUCCESSFULLY?

The step-by-step plan for carrying out structured and successful negotiations is as follows:

- Prepare yourself well: what do you know about the other person and the matter in hand?
- Take the time to discover where the interests lie. The pitfall of 'I already know', or thinking you've got the picture after just one or two questions, is very seductive. I really encourage you to ask the questions five times so that you can reach the core of where the other person's interests lie.
- Respect their individual interests and look for possible common interests.
- Focus on the common interests.
- Separate the content (the issue, the subject) from the person. Avoid personal attacks and focus on objective criteria and aspects that can be tested.
- Based on your common interests, look into different (creative) possibilities.
- Then test the feasibility and acceptability of the proposal chosen by both parties.

Here's an example.

Interests of the project leader

- To carry out the project to the best of his or her ability.
- Being free to manoeuvre with the support of the client.
- Possibility of growing within the company (personal development).
- Room for follow-up assignments that are even more challenging, etc.

Interests of the client

- To make savings
- Achieve the results within the deadline
- Get approval from shareholders and board of directors
- Guarantee a healthy company over the long term, etc.

Common interest

- A result that leads to the company having a healthier financial position, so that both the personal wishes of the project leader as well as those of the client are met.

The iceberg method is simple, effective and will save you time. In the example above the client and the project leader reach the conclusion that they have an interest in common. They can then move on and decide which steps they should take and how they can go about formulating how they want to meet their respective wishes. This is how they are able to achieve their results effectively, speedily and without any emotional upsets. Individual interests are respected but they are not what the negotiations are about; the subject of the negotiations is the result that both parties want. Heated discussions about values and norms are therefore avoided and an objective approach is encouraged. Practical agreements are set up, ones that can be checked and established in such a way that individual subjective experiences do not create obstacles. Attention is focused on achieving the goal and is no longer on jumping down each other's throats. On both sides, there is respect and recognition of the other party, and this respect for the relationship creates a solid basis for co-operation.

WINNING AT THE EXPENSE OF THE OTHER PERSON

Being right is not the same as being accepted as being right. I once heard an example of a project leader who refused to back off and go along with the proposal of the client because he thought that he was in the right. Officially he was right, but his behaviour was not appreciated and the situation became awkward during the discussion. The result was that the whole situation gradually became so difficult that not only did it cost time and money, but the relationship also suffered – seriously – for a long time. It would have been better if this project leader had recognised which interests should have taken priority in that type of situation, and seen how he could have worked with his client to solve the problem as effectively as possible.

You don't have to believe me when I say that a simple iceberg can make all the difference; I'd like you to try it out for yourself and discover what difference it can make the next time you find yourself in a negotiation. (It's a simplified version of the model by W. Ury/H. Fisher, *Probleemoplossend onderhandelen (negotiating by solving problems)*, but check out Further Reading for *Getting to yes* as well. I have seen that it works when both parties really are prepared to invest in the relationship and are prepared to take the trouble, show concern for the other party's interests and pay attention to common interests. Otherwise you just end up getting one over the other person. That will only be a short-lived victory – and the other person will quickly figure that out.

GOOD PREPARATION IS HALF THE JOB

You have, of course, made sure you have prepared yourself thoroughly before embarking on negotiations, with your client for instance, by ensuring the following aspects:

Goal

What do I want to achieve, what is my minimum, maximum and what alternatives are there if I don't succeed in reaching an agreement? In other words, what is the best outcome without an agreement (BOWA)?

Content

What do I know about the issue, the preconditions, the demands and wishes of the other party and do I know where their interests lie? Or what background information is available and what do I need to know in order to be able to negotiate effectively?

Climate

How important is the relationship and how can I have a positive influence on the climate? Or to what degree do I need the other person in order to reach my short- and long-term goals and how can I ensure that I maintain a good relationship with them?

Degrees of Authority

Is the other person authorised to make decisions, do they have a mandate? What level of authority do I have? Do I need to look out for any manipulation going on? It's advisable to check beforehand what the status is on authority to take decisions – because it's particularly common with projects where the client has not been clearly specified, or which are made up of 'members of the management team', that people postpone decisions that need to be taken, do not take decisions at all or shift the responsibility on to somebody else. Knowing in advance who can actually take decisions will save you time and will also avoid misunderstanding.

Making thorough preparations will ensure that you don't end up tongue-tied and no longer knowing what you wanted to ask. It can avoid you getting that uncomfortable feeling at the end of the meeting when you suddenly remember what it was you *did* want to ask, too.

As project leader you will regularly find yourself having to negotiate, perhaps with your client about preconditions or with line managers about the availability of members of your team. The better you are able to take different interests into account and deal with difficult situations the sooner you will be able to command respect and achieve results – while maintaining good relations.

To summarise...

- Recognise the fact that the team needs time in order to be able to work together. Take differences into account and use them to good effect.
- Cultural differences demand a more careful approach.
- Be aware of your influence and take your position into account, which is decisive when it comes to the authority that you can exercise (in many instances this is professional authority). Take of how different individuals perceive the authority you choose (in particular, sanctioning and reference authorities).
- Be aware that you can be seen as a nuisance and that your project may not always be welcomed with open arms. Deal with resistance and opposition early on by generating the support you need.
- Hold continuous discussions with the different parties involved and try to gather support by lobbying.
- Use (professional) networking as a way of expanding your knowledge and exchanging experiences with like-minded people, thus following the give and take principle.
- Remember interests: your interests, the interests of the other party involved and your common interests. Use the iceberg method when you want to negotiate by solving problems while maintaining good relations.
- Prepare your negotiations thoroughly beforehand.

9

And the mist comes down...

Culture, environmental factors and conflicts

In this chapter we'll take a look at the context in which projects take place. In other words, we'll zoom in on the culture of a company and how this affects the way you work. We will look at the need for analysing the environment and I will show you that it is useful to identify any signs of conflict – and how you can best deal with it.

I've already noted that project teams are made up of people from different walks of life who have different levels of knowledge and experience, and that these differences can mean that it takes a while before team members are able to understand each other. It is equally important for the project leader to be aware of different corporate cultures because these will have an impact on the success of the project.

The concept of corporate culture goes back to the 1980s and relates to the way people get along together, what they think about each other and what they expect from each other. It therefore involves unwritten rules that indicate what is expected, encouraged, rewarded or punished. Gaining a picture of a corporate culture can help you with the policy you adopt and, in particular, with the way you present yourself as well as the way you communicate your proposals, ideas and suggestions.

What is culture?

Whenever I set the assignment 'Describe in a few key words the company in which you work', I often notice that people find it particularly difficult to describe the precise characteristics of this culture in words. The results are often long-winded accounts that can also be interpreted in many different ways. That doesn't get you very far in terms of a first impression.