

Leading Accelerated Projects

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Abstract

In an era when technology turnover is measured in months rather than years, project managers are under increasing pressure to deliver projects on compressed timelines. Project schedules are also feeling the squeeze of market forces, especially in the product development arena where laggards are often losers. In response to these pressures, an array of project cycle-time compression paradigms have emerged, such as “agile project management” in the software development arena and “design-build” in the construction industry. But regardless of the strategy or the setting in which the strategy is applied, a critical component that all successful fast-track projects have in common is the elusive *leadership factor*—out-front leadership that is up to the task of clearing hurdles while keeping the project team focused and energized under stressful conditions.

This paper provides an overview of the author’s work over the past 15-years in identifying, refining, and exploiting “Eight Opportunity Levers” to deliver projects on a compressed timeline. A synopsis of each lever is presented, with primary emphasis on how and why the *Leadership Lever* is the linchpin for making accelerated projects a reality— including what this means in practical terms for project managers.

Leadership is essential to some degree in delivering any project, but it is elevated in importance by an order of magnitude when it comes to projects that are on a compressed timeline—or what I refer to as *accelerated projects*. The intense pressure to make things happen at a pace that pushes people beyond their comfort zone is a breeding ground for conflict and pandemonium. Furthermore, since the margin for error is greatly reduced, even the slightest deviation from the plan—say from a minor change in the requirements—may be enough to kill any thoughts of delivering an accelerated project on time.

Of course, not every project is a candidate for being classified as an *accelerated project*. Only the highest priority projects should fall into this category. And even among these, careful consideration should be given to the need for fast-tracking a particular project and taking on the added risks, team stress, and management oversight that comes with it. On the other hand, in the impatient society in which we live, pressures are mounting from without and within the organization to deliver projects on compressed schedules, trending toward a world where accelerated projects will be less the exception than the norm.

In concert with this trend, many of the tried and true methods of managing projects will likely come under scrutiny. Since accelerated projects, by definition, shift the center of gravity in the Cost-Schedule-Scope triad by placing greater emphasis on the *schedule*, managing projects to control costs will take a back seat to doing whatever it takes—and perhaps spending whatever it takes—to get the project out the door. Even standard practices that are known to impact the scope, such as project controls and phase reviews, may be bartered for time in the quest to accelerate the project. Under these circumstances, managing the project is more closely aligned with leading a jazz ensemble than directing a symphony orchestra—engaging in what might appear to some as a cacophony of activity where the players take their cue from one another, guided by a project plan that serves as a framework rather than a straightjacket.

The picture that this paints may seem like anarchy to a project manager that thrives on order and structure—one who embraces *maturity models* and *structured methodologies*. And indeed it will be if project leadership is lacking or is not up to the task.

To gain a clearer understanding of the impact that effective leadership has on making accelerated projects a reality, it is helpful to consider where the opportunities for acceleration lie and then examine the role that the project leader plays in exploiting these opportunities. But first we need a bridge to span the gulf that is filled with confusing terms and concepts surrounding this mysterious phenomenon called leadership—not to settle any arguments, but to establish a common understanding of what project leadership means in the context of this paper.

A Project Leader Is What a Project Leader Does

When it comes to defining what a leader is, there are numerous opinions to choose from. I submit that this largely stems from the fact that the *experts* on the subject are inclined to define leadership in generic terms—as a one-size-fits-all label for every variety of leader and every environment where leadership is displayed. Yet, in practice we know that context and goals play an important role in defining the qualities and behaviors of an effective leader. Leading a development project to fruition, for instance, may have something in common with leading a sports team to victory, but the differences are more significant than the similarities: the project leader must strive for win-win solutions, whereas the sports leader can only win if someone else loses.

Fortunately, when speaking of a *project leader* we have the benefit of knowing something about the project environment to give us a frame of reference for understanding what an effective project leader does and does right, and what an ineffective project leader either doesn't do or does wrong. Focusing on actions taken and not taken will also permit us to steer clear of the philosophical debate that pits the “leaders are born” advocates against the “leaders are made” advocates—the *nature* versus *nurture* debate and debaters.

With this in mind, it is helpful to consider a hypothetical situation to come up with a possible list of appropriate actions on the part of a project leader who is faced with the challenge of delivering a project on a greatly compressed timeline. Consider the following scenario:

During a product development strategy meeting, the Marketing VP announced that the timeline for a certain development project in the queue would need to be cut in half—from 12 months to six months. According to the VP, the project had been elevated, by the executive team, to *top-priority* status due to pressure from the marketplace. Since you had been involved in drafting the preliminary plan for this project, you know that cutting the schedule in half will pose some tremendous challenges.

Obviously there are many questions you would want to ask, and hopefully have answered. But with nothing more to go on than the information provided it is possible to come up with a partial list of actions and interventions you might expect from the person who is assigned to lead this high profile, high-risk project. Considering the challenges that are likely to arise due to cutting the schedule in half, the following table displays an abbreviated list of 10 possible actions:

1.	Revising the schedule to allow for concurrent tasks, where time is saved in doing so
2.	Adding resources to the critical path to reduce the overall project timeline
3.	Working with internal customers to scale back on the requirements and deliverables
4.	Ensuring highly capable people are assigned to the project team
5.	Creating an environment that allows the project team to perform at maximum capacity
6.	Ensuring that any and all time-critical decisions will be made expediently—up, down, and across the chain of command
7.	Serving as a communications conduit between project team members to ensure there are no dropped balls in critical <i>handoffs</i>
8.	Monitoring the completion of tasks so that any subsequent tasks can begin as soon as possible
9.	Impressing on the project members the importance of starting tasks on time and also <i>front-loading</i> the effort they put into those tasks
10.	Managing and controlling outside interference

Table 1: Partial List of Actions and Interventions for Accelerating a Project

It is important to stress that this is a partial list of possible actions and interventions. It is also worth noting that the actions are sufficiently generic that they could apply to virtually any project on a compressed timeline. Nevertheless, in training project managers and others in techniques for accelerating projects I have found that scenarios such as this stimulate creative thinking, perhaps from feeling the pain of the project leader in the scenario who bears the responsibility for making the impossible possible.

Perusing the list of actions in Table 1 brings us back to my original point of defining what a project leader *is* by observing what an effective project leader *does*. A closer look reveals that almost all of the interventions and actions in this list involve delicate human-to-human interactions and transactions—and navigating in the messy, unpredictable realm of human factors is what leaders do and leadership entails. Again, the list in Table 1 is incomplete, but it is consistent with my observation over the past 15 years that 80% to 90% of the *most effective* interventions and actions for accelerating projects involve skills and abilities in adroitly dealing with human factors. And, since this realm involves skills that are fundamentally different from

planning, tracking, and controlling projects, there is no guarantee that individuals who are effective at *managing* traditional projects will be equally effective at *leading* accelerated projects. This is not to suggest that traditional project management skills and tools are not applicable to accelerated projects—indeed many of them are—but it does raise serious questions about the effectiveness of project acceleration strategies that are predicated on methodologies that have little if anything to say about the critical human dimension.

Nouns and Verbs in the Project Arena

In conjunction with the rising demand to deliver projects on shorter and shorter timelines, a variety of project acceleration strategies have arisen over the past 20 to 30 years, one of the earliest of which is a methodology called Joint Application Design (JAD) that was devised and championed by IBM in the late 1970s. Over this same period of time, software development projects expanded rapidly in both quantity and complexity, giving rise to a variety of structural paradigms that were (and are) intended to reign in out of control software development projects.

Most of the current acceleration strategies are predicated on manipulating the *structure* of the project, in some form or fashion, with the intent of reducing the project cycle time, or in the case of software development projects, achieving *on-time* delivery. Each of these methodologies has its advocates (zealots?) and each has success stories to defend their claims. Yet—for reasons that may have something to do with background and comfort zone of their inventors—these methodologies have relatively little to say about the human contribution to accelerated projects.

Lacking a classification system for project acceleration strategies, I find it helpful to think of the structure-oriented strategies as *nouns* and the human-oriented strategies as *verbs*. The *noun-strategies* tend to focus on manipulating the activities, the plan, the deliverables, or some other *static* aspect of the project, and they are typically brought to bear on the planning stage. By contrast, the *verb-strategies* deal with the *dynamic* aspects of the project and are largely played out during the execution stage. Since they involve the messy realm of human factors and human nature, they are more difficult to codify and thus more difficult to package in the form of a methodology; but as the previous scenario demonstrated, they hold the greatest potential for accelerating the project schedule.

Perhaps it is obvious from the earlier discussion that noun-strategies are largely the domain of *project managers*, while verb-strategies are the domain of *project leaders*. Less obvious is the fact that one does not necessarily supplant the other, though the latter have greater potential of achieving quantum leaps in schedule performance than the former. Also, as any complete sentence needs a noun and a verb, so to is it beneficial to learn from and blend the best from strategies in both realms—but with careful attention to the fact that noun-strategies have a way of dominating, and eventually supplanting, verb-strategies.

Acceleration Opportunity Levers

Early in my quest to identify effective means for accelerating projects I discovered a variety of best (and worst) practices. Gleaning from the best of the best practices, and coupling these with my own experience as a project manager and program director, I found it helpful to group what I

had discovered into categories that collectively became known as the *Eight Acceleration Opportunity Levers™*.

As the earlier discussion on *noun-strategies* and *verb-strategies* suggests, the *Eight Opportunity Levers* draw inspiration from both realms, though the primary emphasis is on actions that require a willing and able *project leader*, especially though not exclusively during the execution stage of the project. Also, the boundaries between the categories are not rigid or distinct. This mirrors the fact that few things in life—including the project environment—can be separated into mutually exclusive categories.

With that as a prologue, here is a synopsis of the *Eight Acceleration Opportunity Levers™*:

Process Lever

This lever is concerned with identifying bottlenecks, boundaries, and structural barriers in the process that defines the tasks and sequence of tasks of *a particular project*. Ideally it begins with an examination of the overall strategy for the project by considering viable options for accelerating the schedule, rather than attempting to ‘tweak’ an existing project template. Although improvements in the project process have more to do with planning than execution, leadership skills are essential for ensuring that the stakeholders will accept any politically sensitive changes in the project process.

Planning Lever

Since accelerated projects give rise to a set of risks that are less likely or less impactful in traditional projects—i.e., projects with less aggressive schedules—special consideration needs to be given to the identification and management of these risks. This is largely the role of the Planning Lever. But another important function of this lever is to ensure the project plan is structured to allow efficiencies to offset inefficiencies. One means of accomplishing this is to give the project manager *ownership responsibility* for the contingency time that is inherent in every project schedule, allowing gains from finishing some tasks ahead of schedule to offset delays in finishing others. Since this practice can be perceived as *micro-management*, leadership skills are essential for communicating the intent during the planning stage and for later dealing with the conflict and *exposure* this practice can lead to during the execution stage.

Policy Lever

This lever takes a critical look at any existing policies that serve as barriers to accelerating projects. Often it will be found that there are schedule-impairing policies that are outdated, not applicable to the situation, or capable of being temporarily suspended for the good of the project and the organization as a whole. Common among these are policies regarding signatory approvals from upper management. As every experienced project manager knows, approvals up and across the chain of command are often the source of considerable delays. Because of the political sensitivities that policy changes are apt to give rise to, leadership skills are essential to this lever as well.

People Lever

Given the abundance of technology tools we currently have to assist with the *mechanics* of planning and tracking contemporary projects, we occasionally need to be reminded that the

creative aspects of planning and executing projects fall on the shoulders of people, rather than machines. Unlike machines, humans are sentient beings and subject to performance vicissitudes that can vary from day to day or even moment to moment. And, any attempt to accelerate a project without paying heed to the human variables and the interaction of humans is doomed for failure. The role of the People Lever is to identify environment-specific factors that can negatively or positively influence the performance, efficiency, or working conditions of individuals and cohesive teams, and then clear the path for the project team members to achieve peak creative performance.

Psychology Lever

This lever is closely aligned with the People Lever, but rather than environmental factors and team factors, the focus of the Psychology Lever is on the individual—in particular, the work habits, values, biases, and personal propensities that can influence a particular individual's performance. One of the key variables is the individual's view of time and how she or he uses the available time to perform job tasks. Some individuals, for instance, are stymied by the perceived lack of information and are slow in getting started, while others have difficulty bringing tasks to fruition due to their innate propensity to achieve perfection—both of which can be detrimental in their own way to accelerated projects.

Technology Lever

As noted earlier, numerous technology tools are available to assist with the planning and tracking aspects of a project. Depending on the nature of the project, there are also development tools that can assist with the design and creation of the work product—for instance code generators and code checkers in the case of software development project. As with the other levers, the Technology Lever is interested in any tool that can assist with compressing the project schedule and/or executing the project. Tools that are of the most interest are those that assist the project team members in communicating and collaborating with one another. The reason for this is that “communications problems” are often highlighted in post-mortem reviews as the principal cause of project failures. Furthermore, communications, coordination, and collaboration are especially vital to accelerated projects, and any technology tool that facilitates these is worthy of being considered for adoption.

Requirements Lever

Requirements-related problems appear in a variety of forms. Arguably the chief among these is *changing requirements*. For obvious reasons, changing requirements can be devastating to the project schedule, but there are also other requirements-related problems that can be detrimental as well—for instance, ambiguous requirements, unstated requirements, and conflicting requirements, to name a few. The overarching umbrella for essentially all requirements-related problems is a condition referred to as Type III errors. In a nutshell, a Type III error is committed anytime the wrong problem is solved. In a project setting this translates into producing outcomes and deliverables that do not address the project customer's issues. The Requirements Lever provides checks and balances to ensure Type III errors are not committed. It is also concerned with making the project sufficiently robust to handle minor changes along the way.

Leadership Lever

Although leadership is critical to the other seven levers, due to the importance of leadership as a whole in making accelerated projects a reality, special attention is paid to this vital element in the Leadership Lever. In addition to addressing specific actions and interventions on the part of the project leader—as exemplified in the earlier discussion and also Table 1—the Leadership Lever deals with the traits and attributes of the individual who is chosen to lead a particular project. For instance, due to the high-tension environment of many accelerated projects, it is important to choose a project leader who can remain calm under pressure; also one who does not overload the project team with superfluous information or low priority tasks. As with the other levers, the focus is on any aspect of the project leader’s traits, abilities, or style that could enhance or interfere with delivering the project on an accelerated schedule.

Now that we have had a bird’s-eye look at the *Eight Acceleration Opportunity Levers™*, it is important to note that the circumstances of a particular project and project environment will dictate which of the eight levers should be *actuated*—in other words, which lever or levers can be used to do the most good in the quest to accelerate the project. Each lever has something to offer, but chief among these are the Leadership Lever, the Requirements Lever, and People Lever, and the Psychology Lever.

Call for Action

Over the past 30 years project management has matured and gained recognition as a profession in its own right. This is due in large part to the release in 1987 of the first version of the Project Management Body of Knowledge[®]—or PMBOK[®] for short. The PMBOK[®], which has since risen to the status of an international standard, provides a common vocabulary for the project management profession. It also defines 42 processes (in the 2008 edition) that apply to many if not most large-scale projects. On the other hand, the PMBOK[®] has *relatively* little to say about project leadership. For instance, in the 2004 edition, the word “planning” appears 327 times, while the word “execution” appears only 78 times. Also, “manager” appears 135 times, but “leader” only 38 times.

Few would argue against the need for standards, nor would I. Yet there is always room for improvement and project management, like other professions, has to keep up with the times. As this paper has pointed out, the demand for rapid-delivery projects is on the rise. Perhaps this is because we are an increasingly impatient society, but it is also a function of the time-is-money philosophy. It is my belief that many of the standard practices that have served the project management community well over the last 30 are due for reexamination with respect to what works and doesn’t work in a world where greater and greater emphasis is placed on rapid development projects.

As a challenge to individual project managers and the project management community as a whole, I believe the time is right—perhaps long overdue—to give *project leadership* the attention it deserves.

References and Recommended Reading

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