

From PM to C-Suite: The 4 Traps to Avoid as You Transition into Project Leadership

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For many project managers, the allure of project leadership is seen as the ultimate career pinnacle. If you have aspired to any of the roles of Project Director, Executive Sponsor, Chief Project Officer or even Chief Executive Officer, the opportunity to guide teams, shape strategies, and influence long-term outcomes that often impact at a societal level, is undeniably enticing.

However, this transition, while exciting, is fraught with unique challenges. Not to mention an uncertain pathway to the top.

This article builds upon an insightful framework outlined in the Harvard Business School (HBS) article “4 Traps Leaders Fall Into – and How to Avoid Them” by David Lancefield provides a unique lens to look at what it takes to move from being an exceptional project manager to an exceptional project leader.

And while originally focused on general leadership principles, many of these pitfalls are highly relevant to the unique challenges faced by project managers transitioning into leadership roles.

Project management, with its inherent focus on execution, deadlines, and stakeholder management, offers a fertile ground for similar leadership pitfalls to manifest. However by seeking to understanding these risks and proactively mitigating their impact, project managers can enhance their leadership effectiveness, improve team performance, and ultimately achieve greater success in their careers.

Here are four common traps that so often ensnare those attempting to making this leap:

1. The “Technical Expert” Trap:

Project managers excel at technical skills – meticulous planning, risk mitigation, and efficient execution. However, project leadership demands a shift in focus. It’s no longer about *doing* the work, but *enabling* others to do it effectively.

- **The Trap:** Clinging to technical details, overtly micromanaging tasks, and offering detailed solutions instead of empowering team members to find their own.
- **Avoiding the Trap:**
 - **Delegate effectively:** Trust your team’s expertise and empower them with autonomy.
 - **Focus on outcomes, not methods:** Define clear objectives and let teams determine the best approach.
 - **Provide coaching and mentorship:** Guide team members’ development and encourage them to learn and grow.

2. The “Lone Wolf” Trap:

Project managers often operate independently, making decisions and solving problems on their own. This autonomy can be a double-edged sword in leadership roles.

- **The Trap:** Isolating oneself, hoarding information, and failing to build strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders.
- **Avoiding the Trap:**
 - **Cultivate strong relationships:** Build trust and open communication channels with team members, stakeholders, and peers.
 - **Embrace collaborative decision-making:** Involve key stakeholders, in critical decisions where necessary and actively seek their input. However once counsel is held, maintain a clear and overall position as the accountable decision maker.
 - **Foster a culture of transparency:** Share information openly and encourage open dialogue within the team.

3. The “Control Freak” Trap:

The pressure to deliver successful projects can lead to a desire for excessive control. This can stifle creativity, hinder innovation, and damage team morale.

- **The Trap:** Micromanaging every aspect of the project, resisting change, and fearing the unknown.
- **Avoiding the Trap:**
 - **Embrace flexibility and adaptability:** Be prepared to adjust plans as needed based on changing circumstances. The ability to know when to pivot as a leader, or to hold firmly to your position, is a skill that comes with time, and experience in the field.
 - **Encourage experimentation and risk-taking:** Create a safe environment for team members to innovate and learn from their mistakes. Be under no illusions as leader your actions will drive the under-pinning culture within your teams.
 - **Delegate authority and empower teams:** Trust your team's judgment and allow them to make decisions within their areas of expertise.

4. The “Visionary Without Execution” Trap:

While a compelling vision is crucial, it's equally important to ensure it translates into tangible results.

- **The Trap:** Focusing solely on the “big picture” and neglecting the day-to-day operational details necessary to achieve project objectives.
- **Avoiding the Trap:**
 - **Develop and communicate a clear roadmap:** Translate the vision into concrete, actionable plans with measurable milestones.
 - **Establish clear accountability and performance metrics:** Track progress regularly and address any roadblocks proactively.
 - **Focus on execution and delivery:** Ensure that resources, timelines, and budgets are effectively managed to achieve project goals.

So what are the ‘takeaways’ if you are looking to succeed in one of the top jobs as a project leader?

Here are our top learnings for Project Managers:

- **Develop strong communication and interpersonal skills:** Effective communication is crucial at all levels, from managing teams to influencing stakeholders.
- **Cultivate emotional intelligence:** Understand and navigate the emotional landscape of your team, build strong relationships, and effectively manage conflict.

- **Embrace continuous learning:** The project management sector is constantly evolving. Stay abreast of new methodologies, technologies, and industry best practices.
- **Focus on strategic thinking:** Develop the ability to see the bigger picture, anticipate challenges, and align project goals with organizational and even societal objectives.
- **Build a strong professional network:** Connect with other project managers, leaders, and industry experts to learn from their experiences and expand your professional horizons.⁶

By recognizing and proactively addressing these traps, and collecting the skills to operate at a strategic, rather than a tactical level as a project manager, you will successfully navigate the transition in to project leadership and achieve greater success in your careers.

However be under no illusion – the journey is not easy. It requires a conscious shift in mindset, a willingness to embrace new challenges, a determination to become laser focused on your learning and growth, and a commitment to obtaining the skills, expertise and confidence needed to succeed within the leadership arena.