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Title of the Paper:

Project Management Leadership for Rapid Product Deliveries and Shortening Project Cycles

Theme: Project Management Leadership > In a Rapidly Changing World

Keywords:

Leadership, Project Management, Project Leadership, Change Management, Rapid Product Development, Speed to Market, Innovative Approaches

Abstract:

Unprecedented change is sweeping through the world of software development world. Project Management paradigms are shifting lightning fast. Delivery cycles are shortening. Customers are hungry for more...right now! In response, new collaboration models have emerged which are employing novel ways of managing projects, structuring teams and distributing accountability.

This is not limited to 'software companies' in the traditional sense. Why? Because,

1. "Now Every Company Is A Software Company" (Forbes:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/techonomy/2011/11/30/now-every-company-is-a-software-company/#729958b1f3b1>).

2. "All businesses must start thinking like software companies—or risk getting trampled by the competition in the digital age." <https://blog.newrelic.com/2016/04/22/twims-prince-magic-leap-hbr-software-intel-minecraft/>

Given this background, Project Management Leadership is going to be challenged, tested and watched closely in months and years to come. This paper examines the following areas:

Part 1 – Current Reality

1. Faster product releases: Companies are releasing products to customers in rapid cycles.
2. Quick and multiple feedback cycles are forcing teams and companies to adapt and 'pivot' (in lean start up terms).
3. Emergence of collaborative team models and almost hands off leadership style.

Part 2 – New Project Management Leadership Paradigm

To rise to these novel challenges, Project Management Leadership needs to understand the changing role of project management:

- a. Adoption of servant leadership model improves impact and results.
- b. Encouraging shared accountability - developing teams to 'own' results.
- c. Being mindful: Alert to shifting dynamics. 'Being in the present.'
- d. Need for speed! Faster response is valued.
- e. Project Manager as Leader Coach
- f. Facilitating enterprise wide change.
- g. Understanding and guiding structural dynamics

Intent:

Audience takeaways - the knowledge, skills and models that Leaders need to understand, internalize and implement to succeed in a rapidly changing business world.

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Introduction

This paper highlights the changes that are taking place in software product development space and some of the forces behind such changes. It then goes on to discuss the specific attitudes, skills and paradigms that Project Managers need to adopt to successfully make an impact in the world of business and society at large.

Forces of change

This section highlights why do we need to discuss about new approaches to Project Management Leadership and the forces that brought the world of product development from what it was to what it is today.

Faster product releases

We all remember the days when software used to be released once in an year or sometimes longer. Business was happy if they got anything to see in less than a few months. IT celebrated such releases as 'grand success'.

Then something dramatic happened. Markets expanded, technology progressed at a mind boggling speed, gadgets spread like wildfire. Soon, customers who never knew much about software started using tiny machines (called mobile phones, tablets) that are more powerful than earlier super computers. Explosion of social media further multiplied the use of technology. Businesses were faced with an option: either respond fast or get out of the way for others to take over. Yearly software release cycles were no longer acceptable. Speed became not just a competitive advantage but a bare minimum survival factor. And product release cycles got shorter and shorter. From years to months, then to weeks and days, and finally to minutes. Multiple releases a day was no longer a dream but a distinct possibility. A new era of product development was born.

Constant feedback

The second force that disrupted the product development landscape is the pace of feedback. Earlier, feedback cycles were long and painful. It used to take an agonizingly long time for customer feedback to reach product development teams and finally be part of their work. All this changed. Rapid change of

technologies made instant feedback possible. An unhappy customer can send feedback at the click of the button. Furthermore, customers can simultaneously post their reviews online for the world to see. Such immediate feedback needs instant response. If product development teams do not take the feedback and immediately adapt their products, market share may be lost, reputations may be hampered, customers may shift permanently to the competitor.

Collaborative team models

Faster development cycles, instant feedback necessitated a change in how teams work. Earlier, product development, product testing, quality assurance, market research and others used to work in silos. With the result, collaboration was woefully inadequate. Collaborative working models emerged. Cross functional teams became the norm. Silos were no longer acceptable. Multi-faceted, cross functional teams now own the product and its releases. Some teams have gone to the extent of including customers into their core product development efforts. Concepts like lean start up, design thinking, agile development became the norm.

New Project Management Leadership Paradigms

The forces depicted above made some of the earlier leadership models inadequate or even redundant. To succeed in this new world, leaders need to adopt different mental models and approaches. Some of these are discussed below:

Servant Leadership

Since Robert K. Greenleaf first coined the term “servant leadership” in an essay he published in the year 1970 [1]. Several authors expanded the concept and proposed different characteristics that a servant leader should adopt and display. While differences do exist in the emphasis each places on any particular attribute, most of them agree that servant leadership should be demonstrated by adopting specific practices and not just paid lip service to. A servant leader adopts an attitude of ‘service first’, is focused on developing people, shows empathy, empowers people.

Leaders and project managers adopting servant leadership model resonate well with the modern workforce. Old style, top down leadership is not only resented by all but also leads to lower morale and productivity. Leaders adopting servant leadership on the other hand address their ‘core concerns’ in such a way that their inner forces are unleashed for greater good. This is one of first change that a leader should adopt to succeed in the new reality.

Shared Accountability

As the leader shifts their mindset from command and control to service, it follows that employees and teams get more empowered. Such increase in power also brings in greater responsibility and accountability. Leaders then need to deal with 'teams' as units and build shared accountability. A team may be composed of several individuals : fast and slow; weak and strong; extrovert and introverts; creative and analytic. By encouraging shared accountability, a leader helps the team to look at benefiting from such differences instead of making them sources of conflict. As teams begin to own results, a subtle sense of synergy slowly emerges. They become increasingly more productive, flexible, creative and happy. Building shared accountability takes time. It takes energy. It takes patience.

Mindfulness

Despite being servant leaders and encouraging shared accountability, leaders may miss crucial moments if they are constantly bombarded with multiple priorities. Many leaders unfortunately get into the habit of multi-tasking which has been shown to be harmful to productivity. Multi-tasking gives an illusion of progress while secretly sapping energy. It reinforces an attention deficit habit. In a fast-changing environment, unless you are mindful, you miss important things...fast. So, leaders should learn to be mindful.

Mindfulness is a skill. Like any other skill, it can be improved. But Leaders must devote enough time and attention to master this skill. Unless they do that, they are constantly in the danger of losing focus when required, ignoring vital signs in their projects and missing invaluable clues that every team member provides.

Faster Response Times

Another skill leaders need to pick up is responding with speed, inspect and adapt in rapid cycles. Whenever we talk of mindfulness, people think of doing things 'slow'. While slowness has its merits, it is not synonymous with mindfulness. One can be slow and unmindful. One can be fast and mindful. Making speedy decisions, acting fast is needed. Leaders need to learn to act in the face of uncertainty. The changing dynamics necessitate decision action. Models like lean startup and agile can help in structuring responses to the ever shifting market priorities.

Project Manager as Leader Coach

Rapid product development, new collaboration work environment, need for lightening response time: all these put enormous pressure on team members. While teams become more responsible and accountable, they also need crucial guidance. Hence, leaders should put the hat of a coach. They should become Leader Coaches. This is even more imperative as team now own critical outcomes but may lack crucial skills or maturity. However, for leaders brought up in command and control mode, shifting to coaching mode is going to be challenging. Unless they make a conscious effort to improve their coaching skills, they will lag behind.

Project Manager as Change Artist

Such rapid shifts as described in earlier section generates a lot of unforeseen change in the way we work, way the work itself is structured, in kind and content of conversations and so on. To enable teams to navigate such change successfully, Project Managers need to learn to manage change. They should become change artists. Unmanaged change leads to chaos. It generates fear, hostility, despair. Leaders who learn the 'art' of managing change can create huge positive impact on the entire workforce. So it is imperative that they learn this subtle art of change management.

Systems Thinking

Rarely do things work in isolation. Dynamic changes in society, individuals, aspirations and others also influence what is happening in the workplace. Leaders should learn the crucial skill of systems thinking to enable them to see the dynamic interactions within various organization components, goals, individual aspirations, technological change and even shifting gender role patterns. By enabling Leaders to see the larger picture and interactions within, system thinking enable them to lead as opposed to merely manage.

Conclusion

The changes taking place in software industry are unprecedented, gigantic and impact society at large. They are speeding up product development, reducing feedback cycles and integrating technology as never seen before. At the same time, newer interaction, team working and leadership models are emerging.

Given this scenario, Project Managers are going to be challenged in different ways, They will need to master newer skills and paradigm, adopt novel attitudes and behaviors and constantly re-invent

themselves. This will enable them to do justice to their leadership role and make a difference to the organizations and society at large.

Refernces:

[1] Greenleaf, R. (1991). The servant as leader ([Rev. ed.]). Indianapolis, IN: Robert K. Greenleaf Center.