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## ▼ SMALL BUSINESS

### *Specialized skills, experience distinguish the leader*

A successful project outcome requires the specialized skills and abilities of an unencumbered, experienced project leader.

Keeping an enterprise focused on day-today operations while it executes complex, performance-enhancing projects can overwhelm even the most experienced business executive.

Projects must be led, not just managed.

Effective project leaders recognize the unique relationship between three critical players in the process: the executive sponsor, the operational manager and the project leader.

One of the most effective ways to balance operational and project requirements is to assign experienced project leaders who are unencumbered by operational responsibilities. They can be dedicated internal project leaders or, as many companies prefer today, third-party professionals.

While operational leaders maintain the company's current processes and provide solutions to recurring problems, project leaders address one-time problems and opportunities. And while executive sponsors are ultimately accountable for their projects, it is the project leader who oversees the details of the implementation on the executive's behalf.

#### MANAGER VERSUS LEADER

Businesses long ago discovered the value of effective project management. Project management provides organizations with a dedicated resource that is responsible for driving project activities. The project manager is someone the executive sponsor can point to and know that "they're working on it."

But assigning a project manager does not necessarily ensure a project will be successful.

Many project managers are focused technicians, skilled in analysis, planning and control techniques. They're adept at completing routine projects, and their skills are also invaluable to larger projects.

However, technical project managers often struggle to successfully deliver on more com-

plex projects. They may have trouble seeing the big picture or motivating multiple parts of the organization, or providing the business judgment and intuition central to mission-critical projects.

In short, project managers are not always prepared to be agents for executive leadership in the midst of project activities and the related change management impacts.



**GUEST  
OPINION**  
MIKE PONGON

On the other hand, professional project leaders have years of experience working in multiple cultures and disciplines. They have reached a senior level of management maturity. They are the eyes and ears of executive leadership on projects that simply cannot fail.

They understand the mechanics of project management and business operations, and they work closely with both technical project managers who supply information, and operational leaders who bring to bear required functional expertise. Project leaders are characterized by their ability to:

- motivate a diverse group of team members to follow them and build consensus on decisions that affect multiple groups;

- see around corners and identify issues that must be dealt with by their team — today — to keep the project on track;

- anticipate and resolve people-oriented issues that often derail even the most scientifically managed projects;

- keep executive sponsors properly (not overly) informed of what's going on and how much (or little) these executives should engage to make the project a success; and

- identify and manage project and business risks. Project leaders should be optimists externally and pessimists internally, constantly thinking through risks and contingencies and engaging other leaders to mitigate these risks as necessary.

#### PROJECT COMPLEXITIES

The rewards of effective project leadership have grown as projects have become more complex. Advanced technology, deeper integration with customers and suppliers, cross-cultural

issues, time compression and other factors have added new challenge to even "routine" projects.

Difficult projects demand specialized skills. And while projects have always differed from daily tasks, the heightened complexity in today's business environment has widened the gap between the two.

Effective project leaders possess strategic planning, interdisciplinary problem solving and well-developed communication skills, as well as the ability to tap into subject-matter expertise from inside and outside the company.

Their broad perspective and influence makes them better choices to lead a project than an operational manager, who is best when focused on daily tasks and productivity.

Operational managers are valued for their extensive knowledge of the company's inner-workings and their ability, to support customers. The ability of the operations team to overcome recurring workplace problems — such as supply chain obstacles, equipment malfunctions, demand fluctuations and staff performance issues — is too important to dilute by assigning project leadership responsibilities to one or more of its members.

Successful project outcomes require collaboration, and it begins at the top. Big-picture executives rely on project leaders to keep them informed, to anticipate problems and to identify risks. An unencumbered project leader serves as a steward of the organization and grasps the business outcome desired by the executive sponsor.

While the project leader acts as an agent of the executive, his or her relationships with operational managers are pivotal to a successful project outcome.

Operational managers must therefore work closely with project leaders to ensure the final outcome melds smoothly with the organization's existing infrastructure.

**MIKE PONGON** is Portland practice director at Point B Solutions Group LLP, a professional services firm specializing in project leadership. More information available at [www.pointb.com](http://www.pointb.com) and [mpongong@pointb.com](mailto:mpongong@pointb.com).