A Framework for Developing and Sustaining Effective Project Teams

— Joe Goss

SERVANT FIRST AND PROJECT LEADERSHIP

There are many obstacles that threaten success in a project—whether that work intends to build a bridge, develop a computer system, or move an office to another building. In my 40 years of experience implementing change through the design, development, and implementation of software, I find that one of the most significant barriers is ineffective team leadership. To be successful, a good leader of project teams listens to those who have a stake in the project outcome, formulates with the sponsor the project vision, grows the capabilities of team members, foresees trouble and addresses it, and helps stakeholders make a successful transition to the realized vision. This essay describes how the practice of Servant-Leadership provides an operational framework for those in roles who lead without authority: project managers, business analysts, and group facilitators, for example.

Those in managerial positions may assume the practice of Servant-Leadership is appropriate only for those already in a

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leadership role. I have long felt that anyone who sets out to serve others creates the opportunity lead those who are served. Indeed, those without a formal leadership role seem freer to determine how best to serve a project team, for example. This idea seems aligned with Robert Greenleaf's (2002) reflection upon the story of Leo in Hesse's *Journey to the East*.

> The servant-leader *is* servant first—as Leo was portrayed. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such, it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established. (p. 27)

I have for many years served the students, faculty, and staff at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a business analyst, project manager, and group facilitator. In each of those roles I serve first, which leads to trust among those served, which then creates the willingness to be led. Trust forms the foundation of my leadership, whether advising, coaching, or consulting with others.

TRANSITION TO SERVANT-LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

It seems appropriate to share a story of a difficult situation from some years ago. Before the advent of an online scholarship system at the UW-Madison, students, staff, and faculty struggled with paper-based scholarship application systems. The campus offered several thousand awards each year, but many of the 29,000 undergraduate students had no idea where, when, or how to apply. Hundreds of students might apply for a big-ticket scholarship with little chance for winning that award. Simultaneously, smaller and more obscure scholarships had no applicants. This double tragedy left many students without financial aid. During that time, students typically applied by completing a hand-written form, a task prone to errors and omissions. Some students became ineligible by failing to submit their application by the deadline. Those who did complete an application were required to hand-deliver it to the scholarship officer in the appropriate school or college. Downstream, the scholarship officer wrestled with the hundreds of paper applications, tediously collating and pre-screening each one in preparation for review by a faculty committee. Committee members were similarly challenged with sorting and sifting applications sufficiently to select the most qualified applicants for each scholarship award. The faculty were particularly frustrated by the drudgery of reading the applications that far too often failed to meet the minimum qualifications set by the scholarship donor.

Years of frustration with a paper application process finally came to a head when a financial aid manager and the scholarship officer in our largest college came to my boss, an information technology manager. They explained the situation and made a successful plea for help. Not long beforehand, I had convinced my boss of the value of defining requirements as the basis for a new computer system, improvements to operational processes, and/or organizational change. Of course, we sometimes get what we ask for, as the saying goes. My boss than had me to test my “requirements” theory by facilitating a group of campus scholarship officers to elicit requirements for a new campus-wide scholarship application system.

A daunting task lay before me. Everyone knew that getting a diverse group to reach agreement on requirements would be challenging. The standing joke at that time, which exacerbated my fears: “On our campus, a vote of 50-to-1 is a tie.” I wondered how I would ever help a diverse group of these stakeholders reach agreement on a common set of requirements. Indeed, in the early meetings I facilitated, I realized each school and college had unique application forms and selection criteria, as well as firm attachment to unique operational processes. I often heard scholarship officers say, “We’re different,” “We’ve always done it this way,” and “We can’t possibly do that!” I feared we would never realize the dream of a campus-wide, online scholarship application system. Despite my unspoken misgivings, I began to see a shift after four or five facilitated meetings. I started to hear, “That’s an interesting idea,” “I never thought of that,” and “Yeah, we could do that.” The transition was slow, but we reached agreement on a common set of requirements.

From those requirements, I designed a powerful, configurable online scholarship application and awarding system. A small group of programmers developed the software that met these needs. Thousands of students could now apply online to scholarships for which they were pre-qualified – based largely upon what the system already knew about them.

Through the new system, scholarship officers saw a significant uptick in the number of completed applications. Students could apply for multiple scholarships using a single application. Every available scholarship had qualified applicants. The effect was significant. In the most recent year of use, UW-Madison awarded eight million dollars to deserving students through this system.

What enabled this transition? I am convinced that my practice of serving project team members through Servant-Leadership created a foundation of trust among team members—sufficient to sustain dialog, to openly share ideas and concerns, and to achieve consensus. I continued to discover and refine these techniques for serving the team. I eventually developed from the scholarship application project a system of strategies and tactics that made success possible in every project. I have since developed a 30-minute video clip of these techniques (Goss, 2011).

AUTHORITY THROUGH TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Project managers, business analysts, and group facilitators as a rule have no positional authority. In such a role, I cannot demand, for example, that a team member complete a task by a certain date. If I am concerned a team member cannot complete a critical task by the established deadline, there is little chance he or she will budge simply because of my title as a project leader. My nagging, cajoling, and threatening may damage the only bit of leverage I have—our trusting and collaborative relationship.

As I see it, Servant-Leadership assumes that people strive for good. As a project leader though, I recognize my "good" in pursuit of project outcomes differs sometimes with the "good" a team member may or must pursue. Indeed, the team member's other work demands, personal commitments, and immutable external forces make achieving the common "good" for the project impossible sometimes. Suppose you had the role of project leader and called me to politely ask about the status of a task I am scheduled to complete. I've been fearing this phone call because I know I haven't made much progress. I fear you could be angry, demanding, and confrontational with me. Instead, you create a way for us to work together to face this issue. What if you asked open-ended questions about my situation, listened deeply, expressed sincere empathy about my workload? What if you created a safe conversational space for us to brainstorm ways to meet that deadline? In so doing, we find a workable solution. I feel better, you feel better, and just as importantly, we strengthened our relationship. In this manner, you lead by empowering and supporting me, helping me grow, and building my capability to better serve the goals of the project team. Building a positive, professional relationship with me is crucial to our collective success. Our relationship builds a foundation of trust, from which springs openness to leadership by someone without authority.

ORGANIZATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

In addition to relationships with individuals, I have a relationship with the organization I serve. I describe it here since it reveals another value of my relationship with others. I believe the successful project leader is a steward of the organization’s employees, customers, and economic success – even its buildings. I have this sense of stewardship in my role at the UW-Madison. As I am walking around campus and see litter, I pick it up and recycle or dispose of it. If I see a visitor looking puzzled, I stop and ask if I can help them find their way. If I discover a way for a campus unit to save money or improve its service to students, I share it with those who can implement the idea. If the light in an elevator button is burned out or the steps are slippery, I let the right person in my building know about that issue. Perhaps you feel the same way about where you work. You will not find any reference in my job description for these actions. If so, what does it matter if I pick up litter or give a lost person direction?

There are several significant and positive effects of this stewardship. Malcolm Gladwell (2002) in *The Tipping Point* describes a significant sociological behavior as the “Broken Window” theory (pp. 141-146). Crime is essentially contagious—if someone sees a petty crime go unpunished, he or she is more likely to engage in similar or more egregious behavior. Think about young people hopping over the turnstile in a subway station to avoid paying the fare. In the early 1980s, the crime rate in New York City was an outrage. The subway was particularly troublesome. Vandals had painted every subway car inside and out. Petty crime such as fare-hopping had escalated into felonies. No one felt safe in the subway. The New York Transit Authority hired George Kelling, who, with

James Q. Wilson, had developed the Broken Windows criminology theory. Kelling convinced the Authority to clean the subway cars of vandals' paint and dissuade these criminals from further artistic endeavors through some innovate means. Seeing some improvement in the crime rate consequently, the Authority police also cracked down on fare-cheating, dressing in plainclothes at each gate, arresting scores of gate-jumpers on the spot, and holding them on the platform for a while to dissuade other gate-hoppers. Though it took a few years of arresting these petty criminals, the crime rate in New York City subways dropped substantially.

In a similar way, if someone walking through campus sees litter, they are more inclined to give themselves permission to litter. I can significantly enhance the beauty of my campus by simply picking up this idle trash. There are other benefits as well. As a well-known person on my area of campus, what I am seen doing will influence those who respect me. If someone sees me picking up litter, they are much more inclined to do so themselves. I believe this last point aligns nicely with the words of Robert Greenleaf (2002) about becoming servants:

> The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 27)

My behavior as a servant-leader can have a very positive effect on others by demonstrating how they also can serve others, as in helping a team member meet a deadline or giving others permission to help keep the campus free of litter.

TEN CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Some years ago, Larry Spears (2005) published an essay that has been critical to my practice of Servant-Leadership, *The Understanding and Practice of Servant-Leadership*. What I believe to be the most important part of this essay came about in an interesting way. Early in his years as the CEO and President of Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, Larry studied each of Robert Greenleaf's published writings. As he read, Larry noticed certain recurring words and themes. Curious, Larry reread Greenleaf's books and tallied the frequency of these key words and concepts. Ten of the most common characteristics are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. As I began to understand Servant-Leadership, I realized the importance of these behaviors to successful project leadership.

In the years since I read that article, I've given numerous presentations on Servant-Leadership with the ten characteristics as a core theme. I routinely ask attendees to find a partner and share a story about some difficult situation in which their intervention created a better outcome. I call these interventions "transformative behaviors." I then ask attendees to write down a sentence or two on a sticky note that describes the transformative behavior. For example, “I realized I needed to fully understand her perspective.” or “My heart went out to him. I had been in a similar situation not long ago.” As a final step, I ask each attendee to categorize their transformative behavior and attach their sticky note on one of ten flipchart pages I previously hung in the room—each titled with one of the ten characteristics. To this day, every single attendee among hundreds has found an appropriate home on one of the ten flipchart pages.

TEN CHARACTERISTICS APPLIED

Given the demonstrated breadth of these ten characteristics, can this framework of Servant-Leadership also apply to transformative project leadership? Although I use this framework of Servant-Leadership within my practice of business analysis and group facilitation, I will share it with you through the lens of project management, which may be more familiar to you.

If you are unfamiliar with project management, Figure 1 provides a broad overview of the steps a leader would follow for project success. Figure 1 is an example of a “swim lane diagram.” Notice each long rectangle with a title on the left-hand side. Each of these swim lanes represents a role involved in the project. Within each swim lane are the activities for which the role is responsible. The circles represent the start and end of the process. Each small rectangle with rounded corners represents a process step. Notice some tasks straddle two swim lanes, indicating two roles work collaboratively to complete that task (e.g., task number 2—“Agree on Objectives”) The work for that task is shared between the Project Sponsor and the Facilitator. Notice the dog-eared pages. Those symbols represent paper documents—a charter describing the project purpose, goals, and scope, for example. Lastly, the diamond in the lower right-hand corner represents a simple yes/no decision.

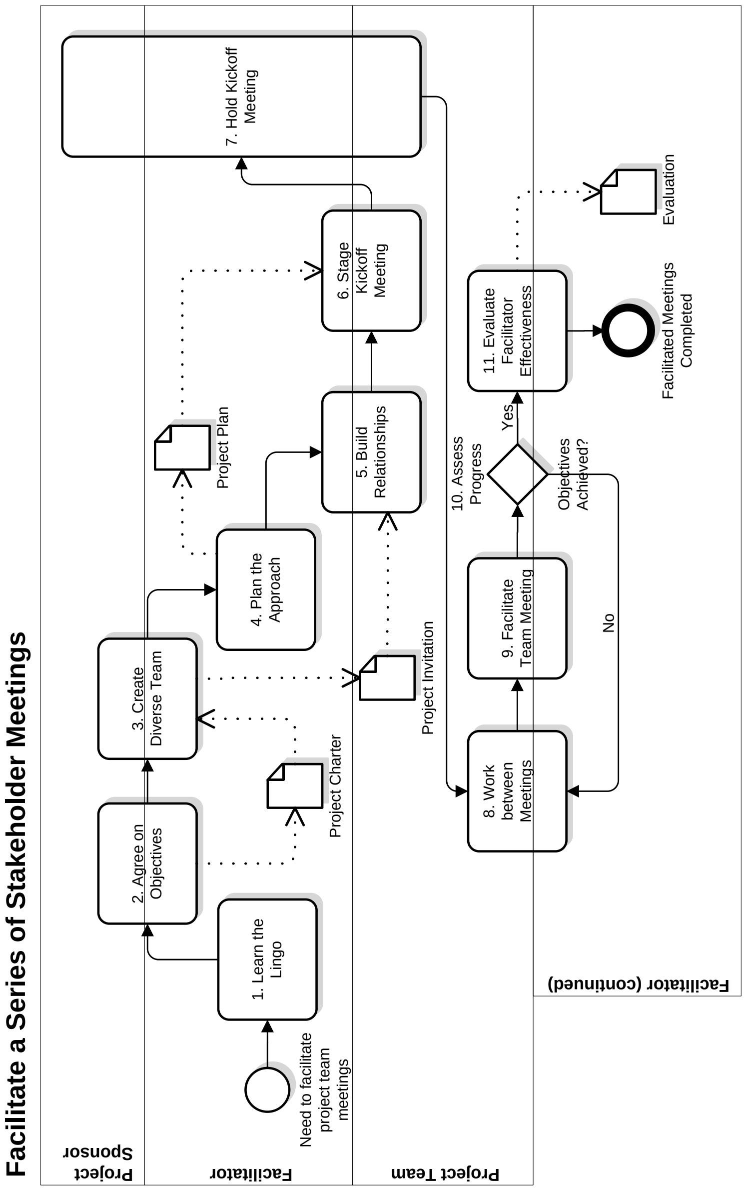

Figure 1. Swim lane diagram showing steps in managing a project.

Listening

For the convenience of the reader, I refer to portions of Figure 1 in subsequent sections. In Step 1, Learn the Lingo (Figure 2), is a mechanism for making meaningful communication possible. To be successful, at a minimum, I must understand the jargon used by stakeholders (that is, those with a stake in the project). Doing so makes it possible to understand the current operations and rules that constrain behavior around those operations. Listening is critical at every step in this project process. Perhaps you've heard the standing axiom—there are only three rules in project management—communication, communication, and communication. There is a core truth here: without listening, a project will fail.

Facilitate a Series of Stakeholder Meetings

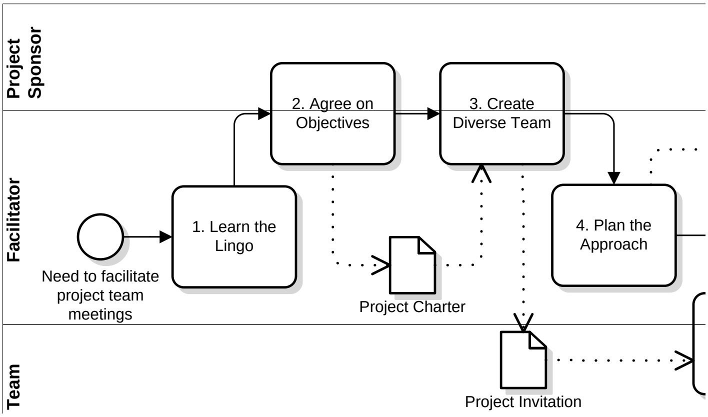

Figure 2.

Conceptualizing

Consider Step 2, Agree on Objectives (Figure 2). For the project to be successful, the project leader must understand the project mission and objectives. I never start a project without having a good understanding of what the person funding the project (i.e., the "sponsor") wants to achieve. As a project leader, I help the sponsor imagine the project outcome. We develop an understanding of who will be involved, what they will contribute, when certain milestones should be achieved, what is the scope of the project, and broadly what steps will be taken to accomplish the project objectives. The project charter is a living document, subject to change as organizational priorities shift or as we discover new opportunities as the project unfolds. Despite the possibility that the concepts outlined in the charter may evolve during the project, it nevertheless provides invaluable direction and guidance to the project team.

Stewardship

Let's look at step 3, Create a Diverse Team (Figure 2). I continue to be amazed at the accomplishments of some project teams. Successful teams include representative stakeholders with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. In the book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki (2005) summarized critical characteristics of a successful team (p. 183). Diversity of opinion is the single best guarantee that the team will reap benefits from face-to-face discussion. Secondly, that a non-polarized team consistently makes better decisions and comes up with better answers than the team's individual members, including the experts.

How is use of a diverse project team an example of stewardship? Projects cost money. A project team pursuing an incorrect goal or using an ineffective approach wastes money. Diverse perspectives increase the probability of using available resources most effectively, whether in knowledge or ideas. Another point is that the outcome of any project is inevitably "change." These transitions are often a challenge for the people affected. Since project team members act as emissaries to their respective departments, a diverse team will increase the level and extent of acceptance among stakeholders throughout the organization. These emissaries are critical to success. If stakeholders will not implement change as a result of the project, the resources dedicated to the project have been wasted.

Awareness

On step 4, Plan the Approach (Figure 3), I think carefully about creating an environment promoting success and eliminating barriers. An example is setting up a good environment for meetings. I consider the number of attendees, whether any have special needs, room furniture and configuration, wall space, dry erase boards, and flipchart stands. I choose a space adequate for the whole team, but which also accommodates the formation of small work groups during the meeting. If team members will be using the wall space for work, I'll be certain they will have enough room to mingle and move freely between the furniture and the wall. I also consider attendees' comfort—chairs, windows, as well as access to water, vending machines, and restrooms. This approach is simply situational awareness—a comfortable, workable space improves work efficiency, promotes ideation, and reduces the potential for friction among team members.

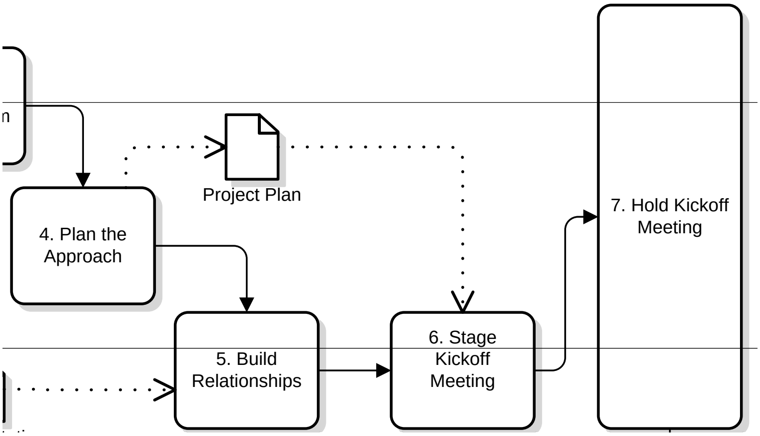

Figure 3.

Empathy

Step 5, Building Relationships (Figure 4), is critical to success. By developing and sustaining strong, trusting relationships among team members, I seek to create a safe environment where new ideas and difficult conversations emerge. Long ago, I discovered an easy way to lay the foundation for good relationships with team members. Before the kickoff meeting, I phone each team member in turn and ask about their interests and concerns about the project. I refer to the Sponsors' invitation to the project kickoff meeting and ask if we can chat for ten minutes or so. I want the conversation to be positive and engaging, conveying my enthusiasm for his or her involvement in the project. These steps help me begin building a positive relationship with each team member.

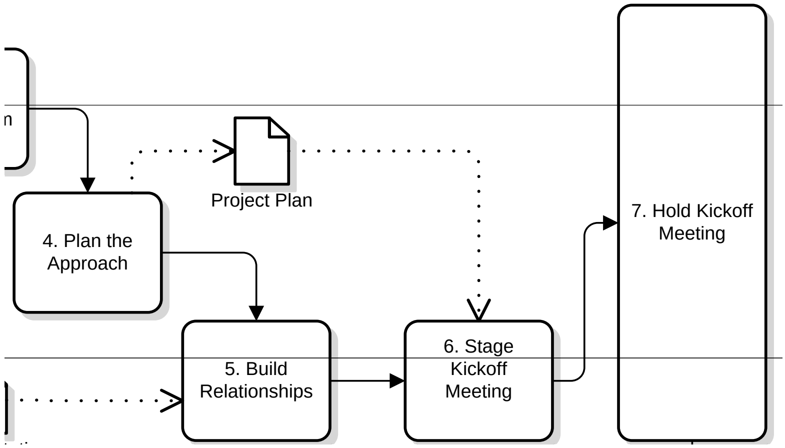

Figure 4.

I continue this conversation by asking questions about the team member—their current job and responsibilities, for example. I ask about the business problem identified in the project charter—what frustrates them and what challenges they see in finding a good solution. I listen very carefully to what they are communicating, for not only the content, but also for the tone of their voice. I strive to step into their world and understand without judgment the issues as they see them. In representing my empathy, I find it helps to ask open-ended questions. “What do you feel we ought to accomplish in this project?” “How might we best overcome the challenges we face?” “What do you feel you can best contribute to this project?” I confirm what I heard in their answers. I want to know what may motivate each team member, as well as any predisposition he or she may have. For example, the team member may seem technology adverse, be over-reliant on technology, or be averse to change. By asking open-ended questions, these perspectives are often revealed. In the course of the conversation, I seek only to understand and acknowledge. This short phone conversation helps the team member feel appreciated and valued. Empathy is the cornerstone of an emergent professional relationship.

Foresight

I'll touch briefly on step 6, Stage Kickoff Meeting (Figure 5). While getting the right people in the room with a common meeting goal and a written agenda are critical for meeting success, it is also important to imagine what might go wrong. How do I ensure the Sponsor will attend? What if an attendee is disruptive? What if the Sponsor takes us off the agenda? Each of these concerns requires consideration and planning. I use foresight to identify barriers to meeting success. For each potential concern, I develop a mitigation tactic for use as needed in the kickoff meeting or subsequent project team meetings.

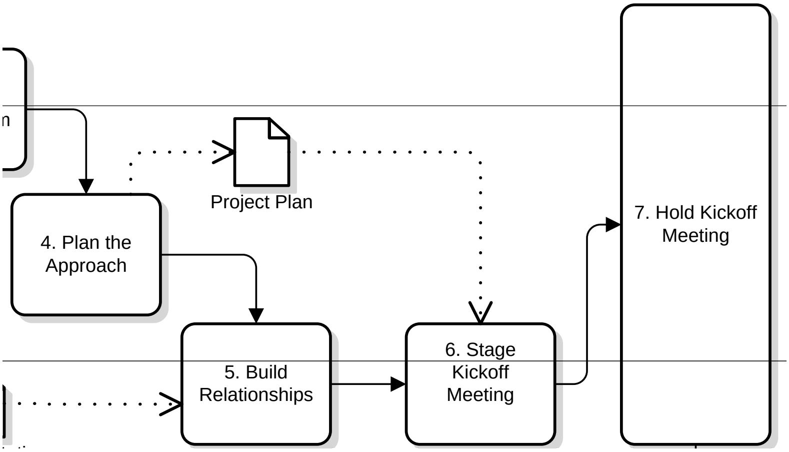

Figure 5.

Persuasion

Let's move to step 7, Hold Kickoff Meeting (Figure 5). While holding this meeting, I typically work with the group to define ground rules (e.g., "listen fully") for how we engage with one another. I like to use a flip chart pad in front of the room to write these rules. In preparation for the kickoff meeting, I seed the flipchart list with a few obvious suggestions, for example, "do not interrupt others" and "ensure everyone is heard." During the meeting, I attentively write down team members' additions to the ground rules. Having the Sponsor present at the kickoff meeting gives weight to these ground rules. Although attendees don't typically recognize it, I am passively persuading team members to engage in a positive way during this and future meetings. To reinforce respective behavior at future meetings, I quietly hang this list on a wall as a gentle reminder to team members about the rules we agreed to use. Anyone can use this list as a reminder of our collective agreement and point to a specific rule if they feel it is being violated.

Healing

At several points in the project there may be a need for healing. For example, team members may have significant frustrations with the thorny problem the project is meant to address. Nevertheless, hope emerges, and people see movement toward a solution (often arising during the kickoff meeting and reflected in their initial enthusiasm). Consider Step 8, Work between Meetings (Figure 6). As I share work products from the past meeting, I ask team members for improvements and suggestions. I often write a cover e-mail like so. “Here is a draft document based upon what I heard at our last meeting. I welcome your suggestions for improvements and any additional ideas. It will help our progress if you can respond by Monday.” Notice the tone—I wrote this e-mail to make clear that I am providing the medium. I capture and organize what I heard at the meeting, but I am not responsible for the content. I give that responsibility to the team; this aids the healing process. I’ve found that healing works best when the means of healing is owned by team members. If they have control over the pathway to their own healing, they will be more completely vested in it, thereby ensuring the solution represents their interests.

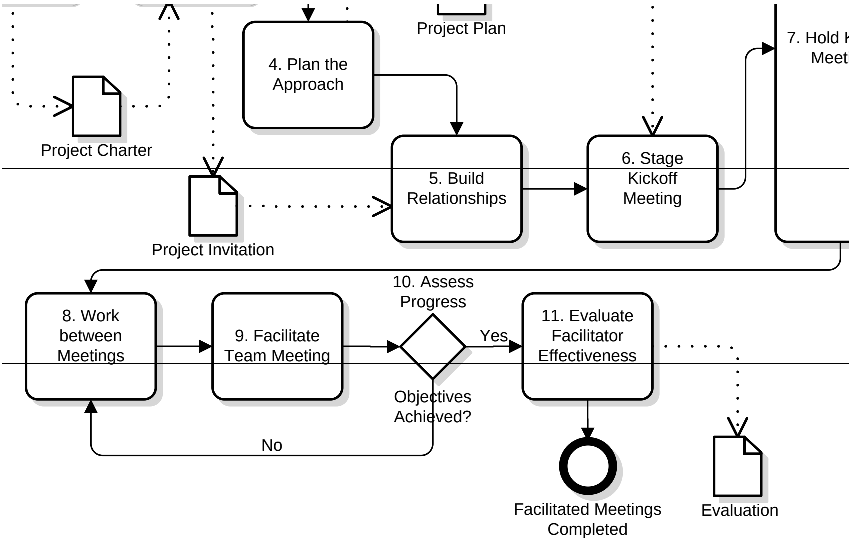

Figure 6.

There are other ways I promote healing. Between meetings, I find it very beneficial to contact each team member by phone and ask a few questions, for example, “How do you feel about what we accomplished at the last meeting?” and “What could we have improved?” My goal is to give them a true feeling they have some control over the execution of the project. This also a great opportunity to remind them about work they volunteered to complete. I find it helpful to ask if they feel like they have what they need to accomplish their assigned task. While a team member is responsible for the work assigned to them, I make myself responsible for meeting each team member’s needs in completing that work.

Building Community

Let’s look at Step 9, Facilitate Team Meeting (Figure 7).

When I lead a meeting, I am responsible for helping the team achieve the meeting goal. I must create a meeting space where attendees feel safe, where ideas can be shared without criticism, where we can address a painful or hidden issue, and where we can reach agreement on a solution. I support, coach, and promote their success. To that end, I watch for signals from attendees. For example, if some are leaning back and yawning, I know it is time for a short break. When a conflict arises, I typically ask the two individuals to explain the other person's perspective. Surprisingly, this approach helps them both understand they were using different words to explain the same concept. Alternatively, I may explain to the team the difference between a position and an interest. Given this distinction, those arguing often realize they have common interests, which often leads to the discovery of a workable position that satisfies those interests. I have a significant role in helping the members function as a team—encouraging them to raise concerns, as well as teaching them how to resolve them.

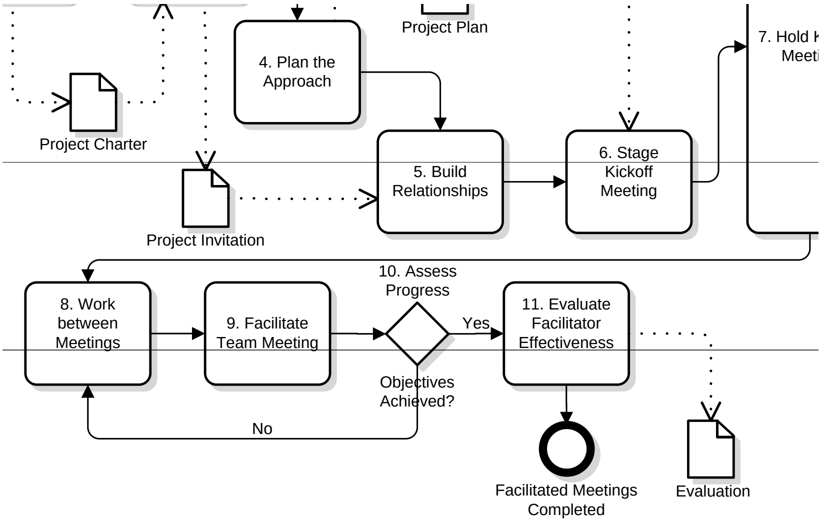

Figure 7.

Commitment to the Growth of People

I sometimes discover a team member struggling with his/her role in the project or within the organization. Perhaps this person is concerned about how organizational role may shift because of the project. This concern may emerge during one of the between-meetings phone calls. If this person is open to a one-on-one conversation, I strive to listen, empathize, and summarize what I hear. Open-ended, humble questions create a way for that person to share his/her frustrations and dreams. When I feel I understand their perspective, I ask exploratory questions, “Why do you think so-and-so feels that way . . .”, “What might be a way for you to . . .”, and “What would happen if . . .” I rigorously avoid sharing my opinion or offering a solution to the problem. My intent is to help this person see themselves fully and create a pathway for growth.

While I might help that person discover a path, growth must emerge from their own understanding and effort.

Commitment to My Growth

I'll touch briefly on step 11, Evaluate Facilitator Effectiveness (Figure 8). I've found that I cannot improve on my project leadership skills unless I get feedback from the team I led. Let's face it – getting feedback can sometimes be painful. There three important concepts that help me feel more comfortable in getting feedback. First, I create an environment of open and non-threatening communication, which helps me, as well as others, listen to feedback. While step 11 appears at the end of this process, in truth, incremental feedback at steps 5 and 8 is critical. That feedback allows me to adjust and improve when it matters—while the project is underway and when we can make a difference. Done this way, that final evaluation by team members probably won't tell me anything I didn't already know. An anonymous survey at the project end should be a capstone, not a tombstone. Second, I disconnect the work that I do from who I am. When they criticize me, most people are focusing on what I did, not my worth as a human being. By separating my work from who I am, I find I am able to listen objectively to someone's critique. Third and lastly, when I hear criticism, I welcome it. Let's suppose someone said, "Joe, you are a terrible presenter." I respond to that statement with open-ended questions, "Oh, that's interesting—help me understand what you meant. In what specific areas do you feel I should improve? What did you think I did well?"

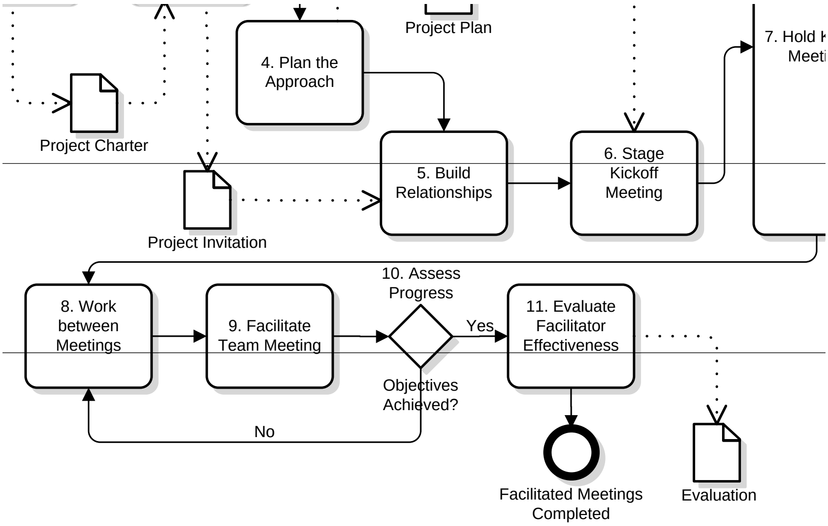

Figure 8.

SUMMARY

There are many challenges in leading without positional authority. As a project manager, business analyst, and group facilitator I am nevertheless accountable for success in projects. Over and over I have found that by serving team members first, those relationships and the resulting trust create the opportunity for me to lead. The ten characteristics of a servant-leader provide a behavioral framework for my engagement with team members. The result has been many successful projects.

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