One theme has poked its head through the lines of these columns time and again -- tomorrow's corporation as a "collection of projects." I've also discussed "networking" beyond the firm's borders: Companies will work as equals, on new products, delivery systems and the like, with a shifting cast of vendors, middlemen and customers.

But as "project" and "network" become the norm, "who's in charge?" becomes problematic. Everyone needs to learn to work in teams, "with" multiple, independent experts, often from multiple, independent companies; each will be dependent upon all the others voluntarily giving their best. The new lead actor/"boss" -- the project manager -- must learn to command and coach; that is, to deal with paradox. Here are eight dilemmas she or he must master:

1. **Total ego/no ego.** To succeed, project managers must be consumed by the project; the best invest their egos in the job and "become" their projects, sometimes for years. Yet project managers must also have no ego at all. They deal with numerous, diverse outsiders and insiders, whom they can hardly "command." (They neither have formal authority, nor even a clear understanding of what many of the others are up to.) Contributors must have their own high ego involvement -- which means the project manager must be expert at letting others take full credit for what they've done and a disproportionate share of the kudos for overall success.

2. **Autocrat/delegator.** When the chips are down, the project manager has got to issue the orders, fast -- e.g., when the lights go out in the conference center, with 5,000 people streaming in. On the other hand, she or he needs to be a masterful delegator: In that crisis when the lights go out, lighting experts should "own the problem" and have taken the initiative to deal with the situation before the chief ever became aware of it.

3. **Leader/manager.** Today's project managers, more so than in traditional settings, are only as good as their teammates' commitment, energy and diverse skills. So project managers must be leaders -- visionaries and invigorators. On the other hand, "management" means being expert at the mechanics. Stellar project bosses match a passion for inspiring others with a love for the nuts and bolts of the job.

4. **Tolerate ambiguity/pursue perfection.** The essence of complex project is ambiguity. The only "for sure" is the unexpected. Effective project managers handle equivocality with elan and a sense of humor. But they must have equal zeal for the tidy. The downfall of botched projects is most often a trifle -- e.g., overlooking bus transportation to a special event for 500 convention attendees.

5. **Oral/written.** Most people have either an oral or a "put it in writing" bias. Top project managers must have both. They are wrong to insist upon an "audit trail" of memos to document every this or that; dealing orally, on the fly, must come easily. However, project managers must also be compulsive about the written master plan and the daily "to-do list."

6. **Acknowledge complexity/champion simplicity.** Nothing is more complex than a sophisticated, multi-organization project. Effective project managers must juggle a thousand balls -- of differing (and ever changing!) shapes and sizes. On the other hand, they must be "Keep It Simple, Stupid" fanatics -- making sure that a few, essential values dominate the organization (e.g., nobody misses the 7 a.m. Monday meeting).

7. **Think big/think small.** Project managers must appreciate forests and trees. Those fixated with the "big picture" will come a cropper over details. Yet "god- is-in-the-details" project managers may miss the main point. Success means seeing the relationship of the tiny to the large, the large to the tiny -- at every moment.
Project managers must be "action fanatics": Get on with it; don't dwell on yesterday's bobbles. At the same time, they run a network with fragile egos, multiple cultures and complex relationships. Of course, project managers don't "run" networks at all -- they are, at most, first among equals. Forget the word "sub contractor" -- substitute "co-contractor." Think the same way about each member of a project team. When one deals with co-equals, devoting lots of time to "relationship building" becomes as important as impatiently pushing for action.

It's not clear that Mother Theresa could pass all eight tests. Yet I contend that these paradoxes lie near the heart of project-management effectiveness. Elements of the answer for the corporation are (1) acknowledging that project management is becoming all-important; (2) emphasizing project-management skills in performance evaluations from the outset of a career; (3) routinely assigning junior people to project teams (in task-leader positions as soon as possible); and (4) addressing the paradoxes in training programs (project-management skills are often "taken for granted," not even the subject of special training).

The issue won't go away. Confront it now and begin to purposefully build a skilled cadre of project managers. It may turn out to be a matchless basis for competitive advantage.

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