

When Failure Isn't an Option: New Leadership Professionals Guide Missions to Success

By Brian Turner, Chief Service Delivery Officer, Point B Solutions Group

In this article Brian Turner discusses the job of a project leader — a job that is similar to that of a project manager. Turner compares and contrasts the job duties and requirements of project leaders and project managers in this article. According to Turner, the job of a project leader requires four key components: vision, clarity, motivation, and execution.



An oxygen tank exploded, leaving three astronauts without power or air. The radio crackled as it transmitted one of their voices from 320,000 kilometers in space.

“Okay. Houston, we’ve had a problem here.”

As their lives hung in the balance, the team at NASA’s Mission Control caught its collective breath and turned to Gene Kranz, flight director for the Apollo 13 mission.

Gene Kranz was a project leader, and it was his job to bring Apollo 13 safely back to earth.

Project leaders like Kranz are an elite set of professionals who are called upon when the risks are high, when failure is not an option, and when the project requires only the very best. Project leaders are part of an emerging profession that is related to — but distinct from — project management.

Like any profession, project leadership requires specialized skills and training and superior judgment. Project leadership combines the science of project management and the art of leadership by bringing four core strengths to each project: vision, clarity, motivation, and execution. These strengths enable project leaders to successfully run mission-critical projects and get the most out of well-managed groups.

In fact, management skills are every bit as important for project leaders as they are for project managers. Project leaders know that management brings order and predictability to complex projects, and they establish the necessary systems, standards, and quality-control measures to ensure success. What project leaders add is a far-sighted ability to adapt and guide others through an ever-changing landscape.

Boiled down to its essence, here’s how project managers and leaders differ:

Project Manager	Project Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tracks project tasks and deliverables for completeness and conformity Schedules meetings and distributes task lists and other documents Develops work plans and deliverables Analyzes project issues Secures resources Manages overall project quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Owns the project vision and mission Validates that the team is solving the right business problem Communicates the vision clearly throughout the organization to foster responsibility and stewardship within the team Navigates the political terrain to build momentum Anticipates and removes project obstacles before they occur Adapts project execution to the changing business environment Manages the right project vital signs, leading to satisfied stakeholders and improved business results

Gene Kranz was directing the Apollo 13 mission because he’d demonstrated the “right stuff” as a project leader. He had been in Mission Control throughout the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions and had achieved phenomenal outcomes in high-risk situations. Through these experiences he developed the wisdom to make the right decisions at the right times, and he knew how to create a high-performance team. In short, he had the qualities of a project leader.

When a government contractor said the incident would be NASA’s worst disaster, Kranz immediately corrected him. “No,” he said. “This will be NASA’s finest hour.” That was Kranz’s vision, which he repeatedly communicated to his team.



Project Management Job Feature

He also spoke with absolute clarity about how the vision would be realized. His team would retrieve the crew of Apollo 13 with no loss of life. Failure was “not an option,” he said, and nothing less than the survival of the entire crew would be accepted.

As a former fighter pilot himself, Kranz knew how to motivate his team of fighter pilots and aerospace pioneers. The competitive spirit that had propelled them to the tops of their fields also motivated them here. Despite the remote odds of success, Kranz set the highest possible standards and convinced them that their world-class team *could* bring Apollo 13 back. His “nothing short of excellence” approach carried through to the very end. The Mission Control group returned the astronauts to earth, and the splashdown next to the recovery ship was one of the closest ever recorded.

The foundation for this success was the planning, training for, and execution of all project tasks. In this area Kranz drew on his project management skills and added his extra ability as a leader to select, assign, and develop his team members so they could execute flawlessly across shifts.

“These four teams in Mission Control worked together like an Olympic relay team, handing over the baton of the shift, hour after hour, day after day,” he recalled in an interview in

2000. “It all summed up to the right people at the right place at the right time, and with the right chemistry, that said, ‘We’re never gonna [sic] leave a crew stranded in space. This bunch is coming home. And we’re the right people to make it happen.’”

Vision. Clarity. Motivation. Execution. Elite professionals like Kranz deliver them when it matters and show why project leadership leads to mission success.

About the Author

Brian Turner [http://www.pointb.com/ourPeople/pop_Turner_Brian.html] is chief service delivery officer for Point B Solutions Group, LLP, a professional services firm specializing in project leadership. Founded in Seattle in 1995, the firm provides a diverse and experienced team of locally based project leaders to companies in Seattle, Denver, Portland, Phoenix, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Point B has also been named one of the top three employers in the industry by *Consulting Magazine* and a [top small workplace](http://webreprints.djreprints.com/1818560907219.pdf) [<http://webreprints.djreprints.com/1818560907219.pdf>] by the *Wall Street Journal* and *Winning Workplaces*. Additional information on the firm and its offerings can be viewed online at www.pointb.com [<http://www.pointb.com/>].

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