

Research Project Management and Leadership: A Handbook for Everyone

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BOOK REVIEW

RESEARCH PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP: A HANDBOOK FOR EVERYONE

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Paprica, P. Alison. (2024). *Research Project Management and Leadership: A Handbook for Everyone*. University of Toronto Press. Pages: 286. Price: \$39.95 CAD (paper).

Alison Paprica found her sweet spot with this practical handbook, identifying a gap in the literature relating to academic project management and research leadership in Canada. She makes a compelling argument that academic project management differs markedly from other, business-focused, for-profit, research and development sectors. She further notes that the relevant literature on academic program management and research leadership is scant relative to the large investment of funds in academic research. Her contribution to this field, *Research Project Management and Leadership: A Handbook for Everyone*, is useful, inspiring, and meaningful. It is a stepwise approach that builds on solid and practical foundations to advance best practices for both new and experienced researchers.

The first section of the book provides an overview of the specific field, including a brief summary of relevant literature, project management tools and processes, a thematic summary of interviews with research leaders, and a brief “how-to” guide for the book. As the university Chair of a graduate program (Master of Social Work degree) at a smaller Canadian teaching-intensive university in British Columbia, I value the wisdom and guidance Paprica offers in this first section, which is gently directive without being prescriptive. On page 22, she makes useful suggestions for how students, emerging researchers, and more seasoned scholars might best use the *Handbook*. It is clear that this is not intended as a textbook for an introductory

course about research; readers are assumed to already have solid knowledge of research methods and their application in practice. After reading this first section, I was uncertain if community-based or qualitative researchers, for example, might find utility in the book. Ultimately, I am satisfied that some or most of the core concepts from the *Handbook* apply to academic research project management in any form.

The second section of the book focuses on the scope and planning of research projects, including tools, defining and scheduling activities and deliverables, budgeting, and involving stakeholders in these processes. The “do’s and don’t’s” of these steps are highlighted. For example, she asks us to reflect on the breakdown structure of project work, asking team members and stakeholders “If we produce this—and only this—will the project be complete?” (pp. 42-43). Section three, with its focus on the transition from research project planning to implementation, covers details related to risk management, team member roles and responsibilities, decision making, governance, and oversight, and using these to enhance grant applications. Included is helpful information for solo researchers (a team of one), as well as sub-teams within larger groups. Sections two and three will be very useful for those researchers who struggle (as many of us do) with moving from visioning and idealism to action and practicality. Knowing that 80% of the value of project management “comes from getting the scope and roles and

responsibilities right” (p. 83) may be reassuring to many academic researchers.

Section four will be of particular importance to newer researchers, in contexts where their team-based research responsibilities may be initially daunting and unclear. Information about the process, from implementation to closing, including project kickoffs, tracking, communications and status updates, the meaningful engagement of stakeholders, and closing/learning lessons from the project are provided. I particularly enjoyed Paprica’s detailed strategies to prevent and address common problems, with the ultimate reminder that our work must be grounded in human connections (p. 141). The author notes that language is powerful, and leaders employ words like “passion”, “joy”, “humility”, and “nurture” to inspire relationships and shared humanity among professionals. Amid the reliable uncertainties and occasional anxieties associated with research project management, this feels powerful. It is also an important segue into section five, cross-cutting topics, which includes running/chairing meetings effectively, maintaining agility, larger research operations and portfolios, and adapting to various environments. Here, the reader is shifted to understanding how business contexts may differ significantly from academic spaces and sectors.

The most impactful section of this book is the last, section six. Here, Paprica shares the short interviews she conducted with 19 highly successful research leaders. Some, for example Elspeth Brown from the University of Toronto, share the value of formal and informal listening, meaningfully engaging BIPOC and/or LGBTQ faculty members, and remaining human and vulnerable in this work. Several others speak of being responsible, innovative, accountable, making tough decisions, inspiring excellence in others, and being rigorous in the work, with both strong management and relationship skills. The importance of teamwork, respect for difference, a focus on communities, equity-focused projects, mobilizing justice, and joyful collaborations are also highlighted. Curiosity, openness, inclusion, and strong mentorship are further named as essential. Beth Coleman from the University of Toronto talks about “wicked problems”, which my discipline is very familiar with, and the ne-

cessity of cross-sectoral work involving under-represented communities (BIPOC etc.) in better understanding and minimizing the issues. The collective wisdom of these leaders is too vast for me to summarize here—but these human elements and sage sentiments are, to me, as important as the preceding sections. I hope that this is being genuinely and inspiringly conveyed to students and emerging researchers, who may initially question their “belonging” or fit in the field of research project management and leadership.

As a faculty member with a commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and Indigenizing the academy and our shared research processes and leadership, I think this is an area, in my humble opinion, where there is significant room for growth and expansion in scholarship on the topic of research project management and leadership. Paprica is clear in noting that the 19 included research leaders are not a representative sample of “all disciplines, all perspectives, and the diverse backgrounds of people who lead research” (p. 173). It is noted that only three of the research leaders appear to be employed outside of universities in Ontario, with one at a university in British Columbia, one in Nigeria, and one in New York City. Yet, their commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion in research management and leadership are evident and remarkable. Their wisdom does inspire me, however, to *seek out* more diverse voices of research leaders, including Indigenous peoples, leaders from smaller universities, and those specifically engaged in research project management with social justice components.

In conclusion, Paprica has been successful in her stated aim of writing a handbook for everyone on the topic of research project management and leadership, with a specific focus on health sciences and larger data management/governance in Ontario. Her extensive capacity and skills in this field of research are evident, and the wisdom and advice from other research leaders is invaluable for those who wish to avoid the pitfalls of research processes. This compelling book will undoubtedly increase the research success and potential of those who incorporate it into their quest for expertise and leadership. As I begin my sabbatical year with a small research team of two, I will make frequent reference to it.