

# Be Bold, Not Beige<sup>1</sup>

**Amanda Arriaga and Jessica Ballew**

Texas Department of Public Safety  
Austin, Texas, USA

## Introduction

Chaos can be defined as a state of confusion in which chance is extreme, while disruption is typically considered to be an interruption of unity. Chaos and disruption are typically considered to be related adjectives that typically describe a negative situation, but they do not have the same meaning. In fact, when it comes to the leadership domain, disruption does not necessarily equate to a negative circumstance. While chaos is almost always harmful, disruption can be considered quite the opposite.

Disruptive Leadership is on the rise and is causing organizations to think beyond how they have always done it. New perspectives are sometimes considered bold and scary.

Traditional managers do what is expected of them, but their style is considered beige, rather than bold.

Typically, we identify executives as those most likely to be disruptive leaders, particularly if they are new to the organization and have not yet been incorporated into the culture.

But if a project team is comprised of all disruptive leaders, with their own disruptive ideas, would that be a benefit, or would it cause chaos? Conversely, what would happen if the team consisted only of traditionalists?

## What is a Disruptive Leader?

A traditional leader is one who understands the charge ahead and seeks to meet that charge exactly. You may also think of this leader as “beige”. This leader gets the job done adequately, but is more likely to support maintaining the status quo or to look for ways to minimize deviation from “the way we’ve always done it” when change does become necessary. You may think of this person as a “manager” more than as a leader.

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual UT Dallas Project Management Symposium in August 2017. It is republished here with the permission of the authors and conference organizers.*

A disruptive leader on the other hand, not only meets their objectives, but they also challenge convention when it comes to those objectives. The disruptive leader will likely ask “why” before beginning their role, and then will look for new and innovative ways to accomplish the goal. They must also seek out ways to expand or modify services to adapt to an ever changing environment as opposed to focusing primarily on changes to the methods of development or delivery of existing services.

Disruptive leaders may initially scare a traditional organization with their new ideas. Examples of disruptive leaders include Steve Jobs and Gordon Ramsay. Both are known to ask “why” in harsh tones, but they ultimately receive the results they are seeking. In the context of a commercial kitchen, it may be important to ensure your staff knows, in no uncertain terms, why the chicken cannot be raw.

How does this translate to your organization? If you are a steward of public or private funds, you would likely want to ensure that your staff also knows what the consequences are of their actions (or inactions).

	<u>Who’s more likely to....</u>	
	<b>Disruptive</b>	<b>Traditional</b>
Be Risk Averse		+
Approach things Iteratively	+	
Promote Autonomy	+	
Continuously Test and Validate	+	
Make Autonomous Decisions		+
Rely on Metrics		+
Value Ideas	+	
Question What		+
Question Why	+	
Plan long term change		+
Promote rapid change	+	

### **Disruptive Leaders on Your Project Team**

Is it useful to have a disruptive leader on your project team? It depends on the leader’s role. It also depends on your project.

### **Executive Sponsor**

There are some advantages to the executive sponsor of your project being a disruptive leader. If a new system is needed, the disruptive leader will set the vision for what the problem is, what the solution should be, and then be open to any method to accomplish the goal. The executive sponsor's disruption should focus on the scope of the new solution. For some organizations, implementing a new solution in and of itself is already considered a disruption. So the executive sponsor will cause disruption in the need for change, and in communicating that need.

The more agile or iterative methodologies are more in line with the disruptive leadership style. That is because this model is supportive of iterative and continuous improvements and change. This may be more in line with the mindset of the adaptive leadership style of the disruptor.

However, disruptive leaders can introduce risk to the project by their very nature, so the project manager must be prepared to minimize that risk. This is done through the creation of solid risk, issue, and communication plans. Strong plans for managing these domains will result in better controlling the constraints and objectives of the project while keeping the executive sponsor informed about how their ideas and changes might impact the project.

Traditional leaders on the other hand, might be much better at controlling the planned scope of the project. They would be less likely to identify continuous ideas for expansion and improvement.

Traditional leadership lends itself more to the waterfall methodology. This model supports long term planning, development, and execution. It also better supports a stable scope and environment that is less likely to change over time, thus resulting in necessary scope or design changes.

This leadership style can also introduce issues and risk into the project. In this case, the risk or issue is not having the flexibility to adjust to changes or anticipated environmental factors that might through the overall project off track in a timely fashion. Once again, the project manager must use the controls of a well-designed project management plan to manage to this particular style of sponsorship.

### **Project Manager**

A project manager could be a disruptive leader, or they could be traditional. Regardless, it is important that the project manager understand how to self-manage to the specific needs of the project and the organization. This means, based upon the methodology and expectations for delivery, the project manager will need to adapt to a more traditional or flexible and adaptive approach.

Once given the charge by the executive sponsor, the project manager should be able to make creative decisions as to how to accomplish the sponsor's vision. A disruptive project manager may propose an agile method with various sprints as opposed to the waterfall method. A disruptive project manager may propose to work in a cross functioning matrix, rather than a traditional method.

A disruptive project manager should also analyze all available solutions to meet the goal, including those not originally thought of by the executive sponsor. The project manager's disruption should focus on the "alternative solutions" portion of a project analysis.

It is not, however, the project manager's job to cause a disruption and continue to determine if the executive sponsor correctly determined the goal for this new solution.

### **Technical Team**

It is typically less useful for members of the project team to be disruptive leaders in the aggregate, but they could be disruptive in their individual roles.

A member of the project team who serves in a technical role should not be disruptive and explain why the executive sponsor's vision is incorrect. They should not be disruptive in letting the project manager know how to appropriately manage the project.

However, if there is a disruptive, bold, way to do their technical duties that would advance the project that should be welcomed. For example, if a developer identified that there was an overlap between their work in this project and another project, and could solve both issues at the same time, that would be a benefit. Additionally, a team member may bring a new idea to the table regarding how to reduce cost or enhance a design. Many times, innovation starts from the ground up. As such, it is important for the organization to consider the feedback of those team members that are willing to speak up and recommend trying something new. As the project manager, this once again requires a solid plan to manage the potential that this type of feedback could possibly have on the overall schedule. One specific way to manage to this is to include the team members that might be considered disruptive in the buildout of the timeline as well as in the design sessions.

Traditional team members might be considered reliable and good sources for historical information. They are also great sources for a project manager to elicit and identify potential risks to the projects, along with proven mitigation strategies. Traditionalist team members are more likely not to question the plans once they are established, which can make the project managers job of managing to an established plan less challenging.

## What to do with the style you have?

If you are the manager of a disruptive leader, should you discourage them? It depends. It is healthy for a leader to ask why we are doing things. Sometimes, the answer is very obvious. But some organizations are stuck in a rut of “the way they have always done it”. In that case, the disruptive leader and their questions are important.

As managers, it is important not to write off disruptive leaders as “troublemakers”. There is a role in every organization for people to question the status quo. An organization that only looks to the executive and is spoon-fed all ideas and assignments will become stagnant. Many organizations may have mandated review periods when all of their operations are assessed.

For example, Texas state agencies are reviewed every 10 years. A disruptive leader is not just worried about what the organization should look like 10 years from now; they may want to change what the organization looks like six months from now. A continual look at your operations should be preferred to a snapshot every decade.

There are also times when change needs to be implemented quickly. In today’s world, organizations must learn to continuously adapt to an ever changing threat environment. This continuous and adaptive change would not be successful without disruptive leaders, or those resources that are more inclined to seek out and embrace changes.

Traditional leaders must also be valued in the organization to support and sustain the changes that are being pursued and to efficiently maintain the ongoing operations and lines of business. Traditional managers can also aid in helping other traditionalists within the organization understand changes in their own terms in order to get the necessary level of buy-in organization wide that is required to implement and adopt changes.

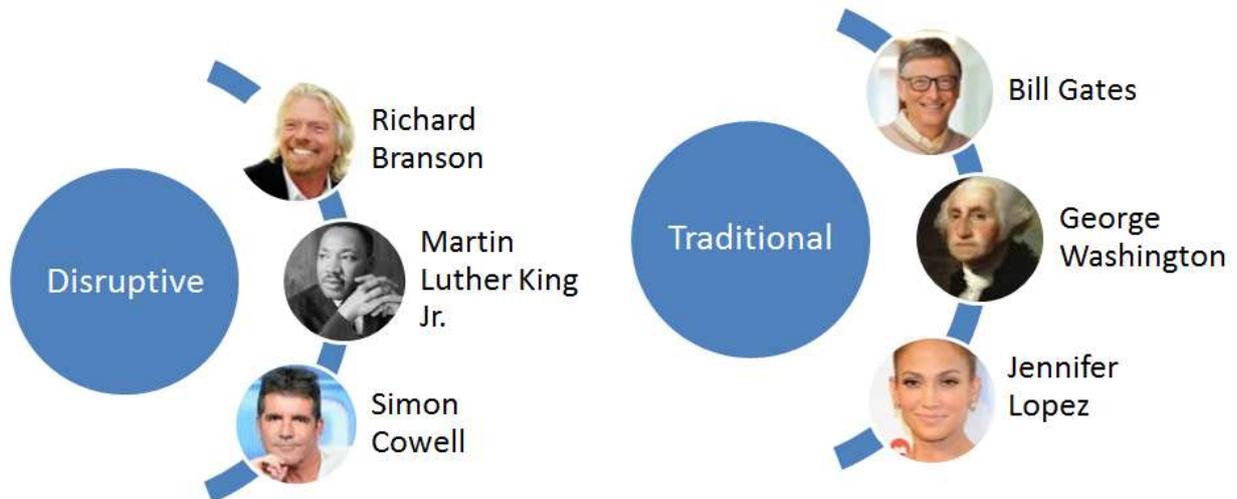


## What are you?

Do you ask “why”? Do you try to innovate practices or processes that are considered “sacred cows” at your organization? You are probably a disruptive leader.

Disruptive leaders can co-exist in harmony with traditional leaders. In order for a traditional leader to not be offended and overwhelmed by challenges by the disruptive leader, care must be taken to ensure that the proper tone is set. Questions like “have we ever tried to do this differently?” may sound less scary than “Ugh, why are we doing it THAT way?”

## Conclusion



All organizations benefit from disruption from time to time. Disruption does not have to be throwing people out of your kitchen on a television show. Disruption could be as simple as holding discussions to challenge your organization to do what it does in a more efficient manner. If you are a disruptive leader, because your questions themselves may cause a negative response, you will need to take extra care that your tone does not add to the response. A disruptive leader can be the most successful when they make you think, but don't question your authority.

Traditional leadership also benefits the organization by helping to balance out the more disruptive style. Traditionals are more likely to spend more time analyzing and considering a change or a risk before acting up on it. This may keep the organization from taking on unnecessary risks or risks that outweigh any potential reward.

The important thing to remember is that it takes a diverse set of styles and personalities to achieve optimum effectiveness and innovation. Without that balance, chaos is more likely to ensue. Both the disruptive and traditional styles of leadership are proven to be successful, as long as there is an understanding of when those styles best apply. Strong leaders understand their own style and are able to adapt to meet the needs of the project and organization.

Strong project managers have a keen understanding of which category their sponsors, executive stakeholders, and team members best identify with and are able to customize their communications and expectation management to meet those styles and manage the issues and risks associated with each while taking advantage of the positive characteristics that each style brings to the team.

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## About the Authors



**Amanda Arriaga, JD**

Austin, TX, USA



**Amanda Arriaga** is the Chief Administrative Officer at the Texas Department of Public Safety, overseeing the functions of Human Resources, Facilities, Procurement & Contracts and Enterprise Projects. She is also the co-chair of the Texas Association of State Systems for Computing and Communication (TASSCC) Special Interest Group in Project Management, and Immediate Past President of the Austin Young Lawyer's Association. Amanda earned her BBA in Management from Texas A&M University and a J.D. from the University of Texas School of Law. She has served as Governor Rick Perry's Special Assistant for Homeland Security and Border Affairs and DPS Chief of Government and Media Relations. Amanda can be contacted at [Amanda.arriaga@dps.texas.gov](mailto:Amanda.arriaga@dps.texas.gov)



**Jessica Ballew**

Austin, TX, USA



**Jessica Iselt Ballew** is the Deputy Assistant Director for Policy and Planning at the Texas Department of Public Safety, overseeing enterprise projects, procurements, and contracts. She is co-chair of the Texas Association of State Systems for Computing and Communication (TASSCC) Special Interest Group in Project Management. Jessica has a B.S. in Communications through Arizona State University. In addition, she has over 18 years of experience in the planning, development, and delivery of information technology solutions and conducting business and process analysis to achieve operational improvement. Email: [Jessica.Ballew@dps.texas.gov](mailto:Jessica.Ballew@dps.texas.gov)