Every project manager wants to be successful, yet there are many definitions of “successful.” Based on my 15 years and $2.5 billion worth of hands-on project experience, research, and years spent training and mentoring thousands of project managers, this paper will describe the common traits of the most successful project managers. The answer to “What makes a project manager successful?” is both profound and unexpected!

The search began when I was a young—of course, a “know-everything” 23-year-old. (It is interesting how major life events stay in your memory.) I was working in the finance area of projects when I had a chance encounter with a project manager. This particular project manager had such a fine reputation that people actually fought to work on his projects. The book In Search of Excellence by Tom Peters on my desk caught his attention, and we started to talk. During the conversation, he noticed that I was intrigued with some of the “secrets” in the book. “Everyone has secret tricks they use that make them successful,” he said. I asked him, “What's yours?” His answer got me hooked then and there.

My continuing fascination with “secret” tricks to being a successful project manager has led project managers from some of the biggest and smallest, the most difficult and the easiest projects to tell me their secrets, which I faithfully recorded. In 1997, someone caught a whiff of my hobby and asked me to speak about my research. I figured it was time that I draw some conclusions.

At first, the list of tricks (I prefer “traits”) was 30 items long. However, the hallmark of a good one-hour presentation is that you cover no more than six items. I therefore started grouping and regrouping the list to narrow it down. In so doing, I made a startling discovery. If I looked at the list from a bigger picture, there were not 30 items but really 6!

This is my list that I would like to share with you. Agree or disagree if you like, but hopefully it will provide a guideline to becoming a world-class project manager!

Consciousness

Yes, consciousness! But perhaps “perceptiveness” or “awareness” works better for you. Not too long ago I was mentoring a project manager when his boss came in and said, “Hi, John. I just wanted to give you the information on that &^%$#$%^ software project. It has finally arrived two weeks late!” He threw the information down, said “Sorry for the interruption!” and then left. Later that week, we began working on the creation of a project plan for that same project. Upon looking at John’s preliminary plan for the project, I inquired of John why the plan was so “clean” and did not include any contingency time. John said that none would be required; they had completed two similar projects in the past and had no difficulty with them.

If you can see the problem, you will have noticed a common theme among project managers—lack of consciousness. We often spend each day running from task to task, jumping from work to family to personal issues. Under these conditions, it is easy to let things slip by unnoticed, but not for the most successful project managers. Does it matter to the project plan that some basic project information was late before the project even got started? Does it matter that John’s boss did not have good feelings about the project? Absolutely! These two points are hints of potential project risks. Picking them up is very relevant to John’s being successful.

In another instance, a project manager for a design engineering firm was assigned the project of putting a proposal together and making a presentation to a municipality to win the design of a new town hall. In such an instance, a typical
project manager would simply review the requirements and put together an initial design, budget, schedule, and proposal. But not this project manager. She sat down and thought!

Upon looking into the project a little, she found that the particular municipality was run by a very powerful and long-term politician whose speeches always emphasized that the municipality was growing. She also discovered that the politician was chairing the committee charged with selecting the design firm. Lastly, the project manager found that the building was not yet named and, as you know, major public buildings are always named.

During the presentation to the municipality, our project manager said, “Look at our beautiful design. Have you noticed how we have designed the town hall so that it can be easily expanded because, of course, you are going to grow! We have also saved this extra large space on the front of the building so that you can properly honor someone with naming the building after them.” Who do you think won the work?

These are two examples of a recurring theme with truly successful project managers! I call it “consciousness”—the ability to notice the relevance of what is going on around them when no one else does. Many of the project managers I have known who possessed this ability did not even know they had it. Nor would they put a name on their ability. To me, it remains consciousness nonetheless.

**Leadership**

This is an interesting trait that is hard to explain, but if you have ever seen it, you know what it is! Webster's dictionary defines “leadership” as “the quality of a leader” and “leader” as “a person that leads.” Not much help there. So what is leadership?

The best way to describe this indescribable topic is with an example. A project team had been working on a project for a year. Their boss was dissatisfied with their progress and called me in to investigate. I shortly discovered that the person designated as the project manager was picked because she had successfully completed a project in the nursing administration section of a hospital. The project she was asked to manage was the redesign of the hospital’s information systems in order to provide an important new service. The project team consisted of programmers and IS professionals. The project manager was a nurse by profession. How do you lead under these conditions? She hadn’t!

On what basis can a nurse lead a team of IS professionals on an IS project? The solution was project management. She could not be a leader because she did not know what to lead the team in doing. After some instruction and advice, she called the team together and said, “It’s obvious to all of us that we have not been making much progress. Why don’t we define what the project is?” After that was accomplished, she went on to say, “The next thing we need to do is get our minds around this project. Let’s break it down into smaller, more manageable pieces.” With this statement, she led them through the creation of a work breakdown structure (WBS). Within one day, she became their leader.

I have always defined a leader as someone you want to follow! You cannot be a leader if you do not know where to go.

**Efficient Processes**

This secret took the longest to uncover. Have you ever noticed that the most successful project managers work the least amount of overtime? (Reason enough to work on being more successful!) The points that were summarized into this category were efficient meetings, good use of resources, and good coordination with upper management. Yet when you look at these three traits together, they really mean something greater. Let me illustrate.

Many project managers understand the tremendous value of risk management. Imagine a project manager evaluating a list of risks with the project team. Most project managers would discuss each risk in front of the entire team in order to determine its probability and impact and, therefore, its ranking. If you have done risk management, you can imagine that this method would cause most of the team members to not be participating for large segments of the meeting when risks not within their area of expertise are being discussed. The length of time necessary to evaluate the hundreds of risks on a moderately complex project, using this method, would be very, very, very long indeed. The project manager then wonders why they cannot get people to attend their meetings and work on their projects.
Contrast this with a project manager who, in order to do the same task, evaluates risks, writes each risk on “sticky” papers, assigns each risk to the team member closest to the issue, and asks each team member to place their “sticky” paper risk on the following chart. (I will use a simple example.)

Exhibit 1. Simple Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probability</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sorting can be done in five minutes instead of five hours. All that remains is for everyone to agree with the rating.

What is the difference between the first project manager and the second? Efficient processes! This is easier said than done. As I walk project managers through case studies where they are managing projects in the classroom, I instruct them to think about the most efficient process to reach their goals before they get their teams together. They often think that this is worth five minutes thought and then wonder why the meeting did not go well.

Some of the most successful project managers not only think before they tackle an activity, they also ask themselves, “How can I most efficiently get where I need to be? “How can I use my team effectively?” or “What is the most efficient process to use in this instance?” Then they actually accomplish it!

Proactive

It has been interesting to me to discover that a very large number of project managers would define their jobs as dealing with problems. This is not true with the most successful project managers. They know that their real job is preventing problems!

If a project manager believes his job is to deal with problems, then the project manager's day might go like this: a problem happens, and he deals with it. Another problem happens, and he deals with it. Most people want to be in control, especially if control means control of their own destiny. Under this scenario, the project manager is not managing the project—the project is managing him! Not only does he feel “not in control,” but he also looks “not in control.” Project managers who think their job is to deal with problems tend to feel worn out, frustrated, and tired at the end of the day. Not a good thing if one wants to be successful.

Conversely, a project manager who believes her job is to prevent problems will use the tools of project management to focus on discovering and reducing the probability or impact of problems. This project manager is thought of as organized, efficient, and on top of everything. She even looks successful. The most successful project managers have been burned with problems before and refuse to be burned again! They are proactive!

Root Cause Analysis

I was once working with a group of experienced project managers when I noticed that one of them was continually bringing up a problem on a project that was driving him crazy. Finally I asked the project manager what the problem was. He talked on and on, but after encouragement, he summarized the problem as unplanned work stoppages from the client. He had been very creative in trying to prevent work stoppages and to force the client to continue the project uninterrupted. He was not successful, because unplanned work stoppages were not the real problem! Take a second to see if you can come up with what the root cause problem might be!

This short summary can hint at many root cause problems. However, the actual problem was that the project had little importance to the client! It was a low priority project!

No matter how many ways the project manager tries to prevent work stoppages, the real problem remains. In my experience, this is one of the primary reasons that project managers say they have so little time. They work hard at solving the wrong problems. As a result, the real ones keep surfacing. Of course, the most successful project managers seem to have a sixth
sense for playing detective and uncovering the real problem before they try solutions. Root cause analysis involves getting to the heart of the matter. It means solving the real problem, not the one that appears at face value.

**Recognition**

One of the truly great project managers I have gotten to know is one who works in the most difficult of conditions. He works in a government agency and deals with 15 different unions on his projects. Yet he gets people to fight to work on his projects! How?

What do people work for? Many would say it is money, but that is not really true. If people are complaining and you give them a pay raise, they only stop complaining for a little while. It does not solve the root cause problem.

People work for recognition, a sense of achievement, or, if you want to get technical, self-actualization. In a matrix environment, the project team members, stakeholders, and others do not work for the project manager. They report to someone else. The project manager therefore has little, if any, control over whether the team receives a pay raise or promotion. How do you get someone to perform under those conditions? Forcing never works. Getting buy-in through getting the team involved in proper project management planning helps, but it is not always enough. The most successful project managers use something else—they give recognition.

A recent newspaper story caught my attention. The story takes place in a hospital where administrators and doctors are always at odds. The administrators need reports filled out, and the doctors are trying to save lives. The administrators had been having a problem getting their needed reports from the doctors for some time. Most everyone thought that constantly hounding doctors for reports was actually part of their job description. But not one person! Through a stroke of genius, this person decided “it does not have to be this way.” They instituted a new plan. They offered a basket of goodies, including food and liquor, to the doctor who got their reports in most frequently on time during the month. Did it work? At the end of the month, they had a large group of doctors gathered outside the chief administrator’s office to see who won! Their problem diminished to a manageable level, and the administrators got back to doing more productive work. Why? Because they used rewards and gave recognition!

In the project environment, recognition is a powerful tool. Imagine having someone assigned to your project who is so annoyed at having to work on the project that they refuse to pick up a pen before 9:00 a.m. and start packing to leave at 4:50 p.m. Project managers can say, “This is the way it is,” or they can do something about it. Calling their boss is like crying for mommy—and is not the choice of some of the most successful project managers.

One project manager solved the problem this way: she created an award for the person on the team who went out of their way to help another team member. Then she made sure the person in question had ample opportunity to win the first prize. Within a few months, the person was still working the same hours, but was working during those hours.

Recognition can come in many forms, and it does not take a genius to come up with ways to recognize people. Team T-shirts as prizes are somewhat common, but how about the aspirin award? For…someone who solves a headache! The Visine® award? For…someone who does something to get the red out of the project budget! The most successful project managers, I have found, have a little fun on their projects and acknowledge their team’s need for self-actualization. They give recognition!

**Project Management**

Okay, I can’t help but add in an extra item for our list. It should go without saying that the most successful project managers also know real project management. But then again, since so many experienced project managers do not use professional project management techniques, maybe we should describe the ones that can make the biggest difference. These include: project charters, scope statements, a work breakdown structure, risk management, PERT estimating, network diagramming, the critical path, managing by exception to plan, conflict management, change management, and lessons learned. The most successful project managers do not just use these techniques—they do something more!

For example, they use a work breakdown structure not just to break the project down into more manageable pieces. They also hand it to their customer and say, “This is what we plan to do. Do you agree?” And “You realize that if we make changes to this later, it could take between 15 and 75 times more of your time to get this project done!” The most
successful project managers do not use these techniques because they are supposed to, but they use them in creative ways to get the biggest benefits out of them.

Summary

Becoming very successful as a project manager is not easy. No matter what types of projects you work on or who you work with, there are many ways to be successful. After over 15 years of active study of some of the most successful project managers from around the world, what makes them successful, in my opinion, includes: consciousness, leadership, proactive, efficient processes, root cause analysis, and recognition. Try this list out, and see for yourself!

Rita Mulcahy, PMP, is an internationally recognized expert in project management, risk management, and the PMP® exam, specializing in Tricks of the Trade®. She is the author of the books PMP® Exam Prep and Risk Management, Tricks of the Trade® for Project Managers. She has also developed the following products to help people prepare for the PMP exam: Hot Topics Flashcards (audio CD or flip-book format), Rita’s Pocket PMP® Exam, and the CD-ROM PM FASTrack, in addition to other classroom-based and online courses. Rita has been a monthly contributor to PMI’s PM Network, has spoken to standing-room only crowds, and has presented encore presentations at several of PMI’s annual conferences. Rita is the president of RMC Project Management and has over $2.5 billion of hands-on project experience.