What Makes a Project Manager Successful?
Part II

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The following paper was presented by Rita Mulcahy at the Project Management Institute 2002 Seminars and Symposium in San Antonio, Texas, USA.

Every project manager wants to be successful, yet there are many definitions of “success.”

In 1998, I presented the results of 15 years of research into what makes the best project managers the best. The interest in the topic was astounding, with an encore presentation requested by PMI at the 1998 annual conference. This paper will do two things; first describe the common traits of the most successful project managers 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. Second, I will show you some even more surprising information: What people say makes a project manager successful and what it actually takes are very different.

The search began when I was a young—of course, a “know-everything” 23-year-old. 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 and teach others to acquire these skills, so 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 broader perspective, there were not 30 items but really 6! I would like to share my list with you. Agree or disagree, but hopefully it will provide a guideline to becoming a world-class project manager!

Second Guesses Themselves (Reevaluates)

We all have too much to do and need to handle as much work as possible. However, the best project managers confirm that what they think they know is actually correct. This usually takes the form of asking themselves:

- Is everything really all right with this project?
- Has the major decision I made last week been proven to be correct?
- What did I miss in the last team meeting?
- What is really going on in this meeting I am leading? Is everyone looking satisfied with the progress of the meeting?
- What one thing can we change about how this project is managed (controlled, staffed, supported by management, etc.) that will make it better?
- What one thing can I change about how I manage this project that will make the project easier to complete (save time, improve quality, etc.)?
- Which person has stretched the truth?
A project manager was managing a large software integration project that showed it was performing within the project plan and within the predefined project control parameters. Most people would feel comfortable with the project status, but not this project manager. He had a feeling something was missing, so he began to ask his team members, “What one thing needs to change on this project?” On more than one occasion, he received a similar answer from stakeholders: “We need to change the staffing of the core project team.” Instead of just asking “why,” the project manager followed the question with others: “What would be achieved by doing so? What would we lose by not doing so?” As a result, he discovered that there was a member of the core team who had been told by management not to divulge the actual problems that the department was facing in completing the project. The stakeholders had heard about this but had not realized that the project manager did not know.

Another project manager was managing the design of a new handheld computer to be used in supermarkets to scan inventory. The project was about to enter final design. It was a little behind, but a recovery plan had already been created to reverse that trend. Though everyone would have said it was a waste of time, the project manager scheduled a focus group meeting with a sampling of end users for the express purpose of discovering if everything was all right with the design. He was second guessing himself because he realized that once the project moved into final design of the computer, the cost of changes would skyrocket. It was only during this meeting that it was discovered that a large portion of the end users would be working in cold areas when they used the computer and that the size of the keypad would not accommodate gloved fingers.

Another project manager was managing a project that was having the usual share of problems when he decided to have the project team complete an anonymous evaluation of the project manager’s performance to date. Can you imagine how hard that would be to do and how hard it would be to read? The project manager was startled to discover that the things he thought he did best and worst differed greatly from the team members’ opinions.

What have these project managers gained by this second guessing? Not the inability to make decisions, as the phrase “second guessing” might suggest, but rather dramatically improved performance that cannot be gained through any other means. No one can tell us there is a problem. We are not always ready to hear and believe it, especially if it is a personal problem. We have to discover it for ourselves! It takes a great project manager to be strong enough to second guess him- or herself.

**Prevents Overtime**

Yes, I have said it—a lot of overtime is an indication of a bad project manager. Many company cultures are fraudulently valuing overtime. Those that work a lot of hours are thought of as more effective. Those that go home at a reasonable time are thought of as lacking. This is a fraud, and the best project managers know it.

Have you ever seen the lights allowing access to highways? Sometimes there is a long line of cars waiting when the highway does not seem crowded. Did you know there is a reason? Imagine a highway during rush hour. Cars move slowly and are spaced close together. What happens if there is an accident or someone just presses his or her brake quickly? Everyone is slowed down, and every car is affected. Would the effect be the same during another part of the day?

Why is overtime so deadly to a project and a project manager? First, if everyone is forced to work overtime, there is no time to deal with the problems (risks) that could not have been planned for. It gets worse when we start to look at a department or a company. A problem with project A will delay project B if there is no flexibility in staff and time available to deal with it. If everyone is working overtime, when one project has a problem, *all projects are delayed*. This shows the fallacy about overtime.

A great project manager left work everyday at 5:30 p.m. His coworkers would tease him about going home “early,” because they would be staying until 7:00 p.m. He would say to them, “My projects are in control. How about yours?” They may have teased him, but if you were in management, who would you give the next important project to? In fact, within three years, this project manager was being assigned all the important projects and had salary raises to go with them. His colleagues were still teasing him about going home “early,” but they were also asking themselves, “How does he get all the important projects?”

The best project managers know that overtime happens for a reason—and usually not for a good reason. Though many people enjoy their work and want to work extra hours, instances of overtime must be looked into to find any problems and their root causes. Otherwise, the problems will just get worse and will show up again. When a project manager does
not control the amount of overtime and investigate causes of overtime, he or she loses control of project productivity, performance, credibility with team members, and buy-in. The best project managers do not work a lot of overtime, and neither do their teams!

**Sees the Big Picture**

This one is hard to describe, in that it has so many facets. The best project managers are able to get their heads out of the sand to see the whole big picture and how the project, themselves, problems, and the team fit into it. In my study, this trait was described with many phrases, including:

- Prioritization: Able to sort out important issues from “static”
- Is politically astute
- Understands the business environment and how the project fits into it
- Gets all issues out on the table
- Has the ability to look ahead—projection
- Anticipates the needs of customer, team, and management
- Gives attention to the future
- Has good intuition
- Is an instigator
- Knows what is going on with the team, company, the project, the industry
- Perceptional skills (knows what motivates people)
- Is plugged in
- Performs root cause analysis
- Understands nature of project (objectives, goals, etc.)

One of the roles of the project manager is to help the team put the work in focus, make sure there is as little rework as possible, and prevent gold plating and added functionality. A great project manager can manage the details and still monitor the company to see how the project fits in and, therefore, have a more successful project.

A great project manager would be able to communicate the following types of information to the team:

“The only way we are going to get this project accepted by the accounting department is to focus our efforts on showing how the project will make the next financial cycle easier to manage. We should not talk with them about improving the information going to marketing, the core function of the project.”

“I know you are interested in this project, but we have to remember that this project has very low priority to the customer, and we must be sure not to spend too much of our effort making the project better when we have so many other projects to work on.”

“The last thing this team could want is for this project not to be fully utilized when we are finished. So, I want to let you know that I have been meeting with management to make sure that they know how to take full advantage of the benefits of our project when it is completed.”

“I just heard that our supplier has begun the final design of the next upgrade to their materials. What information should I get from the supplier so that we can evaluate the impact of the upgrade on our project?”

All these are examples of project managers who are plugged in and understand the big picture. Can you imagine the improved performance and lowered project cost from taking such actions?

**Gets Buy-In**

There are still too many project managers who think that project management is creating a project schedule in project management software (which they think is a project plan) and then giving it out to the team, thereby telling the team what to do. Real project management involves the project manager as the facilitator or integrator of others’ ideas. Great project management is all about getting and keeping buy-in.

The definition of a successful project is one that is on time, within budget, within acceptable quality limits, completes all the scope of work, and satisfies the stakeholders. How do you keep stakeholders satisfied? Buy-in! Therefore, after
the charter is created, one of the first steps in project management is to determine the stakeholders and their needs and make sure they are included in the project.

Buy-in helps prevent conflict, changes, wasted meetings, and a loss of resources and leads to a more successful project. To those in my survey, buy-in means:

- Exercising communication skills
- Influencing (able to guide and influence stakeholders, creating change in the organization)
- Getting support from upper management
- Building and maintaining relationships
- Delighting both customers and management consistently
- Developing strong relationships with business and technical teams
- Building public relations
- Understanding top management

Gaining buy-in requires the knowledge that managing up, sideways, and down is important, as well as the ability to make it happen. It means working to gain real commitment to the project and the project plan from management, the sponsor, the team, stakeholders, business and technical teams, and even the public.

**Knows They Do Not Know Everything**

Many people have told me this was an important feature of a successful project manager, but they then proceeded to tell me how much they knew—they talked a good game but did not really believe it. To be a truly great project manager, one needs to:

- Learn from mistakes
- Continue their education
- Admit they don't know or can't do
- Admit when they are wrong
- Carry a pen or pencil
- Not be consumed with the work
- Have the drive and initiative to learn and perfect project management skills

When meeting with a team member about a task for which the project manager does not have technical skills, a bad project manager would say, “Do it this way!” A great project manager would say, “Can you explain to me why that would be the best way to complete the task?”

It is exciting to see a great project manager in action. I was once mentoring a project manager when he discovered that his success in identifying risks on the project was weak at best. Instead of hiding, I got a chance to witness the project manager actually saying to the team, “I have discovered that I did not lead the team well enough through the risk process on this project. I know spending more time on risk is the last thing we all feel we have time for, but I estimate that we have not identified many risks that could cause each of us to have to spend 25 percent more time on this project. I promise to be more careful in the future and not waste your time.”

The words were delivered with honesty and integrity. It did not result in complaints, but rather a little shock from the team that the project manager would admit an error. This shock was followed by smiles and an amazing amount of additional buy-in from the team. Wow! Word even got to senior management—not of the specific instance, but rather that the project manager was competent and easy to work with.

The great project manager’s everyday conversation uses words like “Explain to me,” “Show me,” “Why?” “What is your opinion?” “What do you think needs to be done?” “What are the alternatives you came up with before you made your choice?” The honest asking of such questions is so important that team members will mention this attribute among the first four qualities they wish to have in their project managers.

**Has an Informal Network**

I was interviewing a project manager when someone from another department came into the office to ask a question. After they left, I asked if the project manager was working on a project with the visitor, as the visitor was much higher
in the organization than the project manager. He said no; they were just sending each other relevant information. When I asked whom else he received relevant information from, he mentioned people from throughout the 7,000-employee company. I asked how this network got formed, and he did not know. When we investigated, we discovered that it was not even a large network. It consisted of only 12 people in a company of 7,000. It did not contain only highly paid people. Salaries for people in the network ranged from $30,000 to $120,000.

It was because these people were willing to improve themselves, continue to learn, and share their knowledge with others that the network formed informally on its own. These people were looking for others they could trust and share information with. They were looking to gain help from others like them who wanted to do better.

In one case, someone from the network called a fellow project manager to let him know something they heard about his project being talked about behind the project manager’s back. At other times, people in the network used it to find ways to get around a problem on their projects. In other instances, project managers in different departments used the network to get support for using real project management within their companies. The network provided a place to share ideas on what was working and not working. Can you imagine how valuable such a network would be to you? A great project manager is “plugged in.”

**Understands the Art of Asking Questions**

As you read through this paper, you may have started to realize that the items listed here begin to connect to each other. Have you noticed where the art of asking questions connects to “realizes they do not know everything?”

A great project manager does not wait for problems but goes out and finds them. A great project manager realizes he or she does not know everything about the project or the technical work. A great project manager helps others instead of telling them what to do. How do you do all these things? Through the art of asking questions.

A financial services company owned two buildings and decided that it would be better to connect the two buildings on the second floor. They needed someone to manage the project, so they selected the project manager who was able to handle unusual projects. Was the new project manager an expert on bridge construction? No. She was a project manager for financial projects. Yet the project was very successful. How did she do it? By asking questions!

To help determine the best design and construction company, she asked:
- Why are you the best company to complete this project?
- What did your analysis conclude are the top five risks on this project? What can we do to help you prevent them? What are you going to do?
- How does your budget map to your work breakdown structure?

To help manage the project, she asked:
- Can you name one way we are getting in your way this week?
- How can we help you make the project flow smoothly?
- What options did you consider before you came to that conclusion?

When there was a problem that needed her decision, she could not rely on technical expertise, so she asked questions like:
- What are the three best ways to handle this? What is good about the first one? Bad? What is good about the second? Bad? Etc.
- How will this affect the risk of the project?
- If you owned this bridge, which decision would you make?

In doing so, not only did she show she valued expert opinion, but she also showed that she realized she does not know everything. She gained valuable information in order to make an informed decision.

**What Did the Survey Say?**

While I was giving speeches and classes on this topic, I began to notice something strange. When asked “What makes a project manager successful?” people were replying with skills that should be commonplace, not that would make one the very best. I decided to investigate further and started a more formal survey of what people think on this matter. During my advanced project management classes and during talks on the subject around North America since early 1998, I have
surveyed over 1,041 project managers, team members, and senior managers on what makes a project manager successful. The study uncovered some startling information!

The first column describes what they think makes a project manager successful. The second denotes frequency. The third places them into one of the following categories derived from the data, not from any preconceived notions. The last column recategorizes similar data into some of the items listed above. Think about what you are seeing as you read the table, and see if you see the same things that I note below the table.

**Exhibit 1. What Makes a Project Manager Successful?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Skill Category</th>
<th>Broad Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td>Buy-In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to get it done/goal focused</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership by example</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/interpersonal skills</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivator</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to team</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following the project management methodology but with the understanding that each project is different—what works well with one project may not work well with others</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properly define correct set of requirements</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have fun/sense of humor</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust/respect/reputation/integrity</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation skills</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Technical Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable/experienced/understands the business/technology</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Technical Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perserverance/stamina</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Building</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude (also positive project-focused attitude)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting/communicating scope</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan for unexpected changes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward people/take care of your team</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dealing with Others</td>
<td>Team Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to detail</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep on top of issues and action items</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegates</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey Conclusions

1) What people think makes a project manager successful and what it actually takes are very different. Have you seen how the study does not show anything unexpected? In fact, it looks like a list of common traits in a project manager, not what makes the best project managers. Few people have really thought about what it takes to be the best. Twenty-six project managers during a recent informal interview on the results of the survey thought the results showed that project managers are too busy trying to get even basic project management used in their companies.

They have not taken the time to try to be better project managers.

2) The soft side of project management was more highly prized than project management skills. If we were to categorize the skills most in demand, the study shows:

- Personal skills (611 responses)
- Skills in dealing with others (249 responses)
- Project management skills (133 responses)
- Technical skills (48 responses)

It is well known that technical skills are not a key ingredient in making great project managers. They are helpful, but a good project manager can manage projects they technically do not know anything about. So the fact that technical skills are listed last is not surprising.

But if you look at project management skills, something stands out. The best project managers know that process is everything. Using the project management process in conjunction with soft skills gives the project manager the power to prevent problems. Even by grouping the results by Broad Category, only 133 of the 1,041 respondents mentioned something about the process of project management.

The group of 26 project managers thought project management was given a lower rating than soft skills because there are still too many people who think that project management is only using soft skills and not a structured process that requires training. This is worth further study.

Summary

Becoming very successful as a project manager will not be easier until our profession gets more companies to support the use of basic project management tools. However, there are many things we can do now, including: second guessing, decreasing overtime, seeing the big picture, getting buy-in, knowing that you do not know everything, building an informal network, and asking questions. Use these items, and those I wrote about in the 1998 paper, and you too can be the best of the best. Try it out and see for yourself.

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