Eat Your Frogs

The Ultimate Guide to Taking Charge of Your Career

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Introduction

“If it’s your job to eat a frog, it’s best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it’s your job to eat two frogs, it’s best to eat the biggest one first.”

— Mark Twain

Twain’s frog is a metaphor for completing your most challenging tasks first thing in the morning. Once you’ve completed those tasks, you can ride that sense of accomplishment for the rest of the day. Everything that follows will feel a little bit easier, knowing that you’ve already done the hardest part.

Over the course of a career, you’ll have to eat a lot of frogs. This book was created to help you do just that. This collection of our readers’ favorite career-related articles from the last decade covers everything from managing yourself to leading a team to growing in your career.

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Building Your Skillset
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Six Essential Skills for Project Managers

BY CESAR ABEID

Years ago I was in Brazil managing the installation of a monitoring system for a large construction project. As I told the chief electrician how to mount a piece of equipment, he raised his eyebrows and said, “You’re the boss.”

I knew what was happening. Because I was the project manager, the chief electrician didn’t feel he could disagree with me, even though he wanted to. In this case he was right, I was wrong, and the result was a loss of time and resources.

Technical training in project management does not prepare you for dealing with such nuanced circumstances. As a project management professional, you’re a change agent working with teams of complex individuals in many different roles. Somehow you’re supposed to be a leader, know how to read body language, negotiate, and be a master at myriad other skills.

How do you do it all?

Here are the six must-have skills for project managers, and books that will help you get there.

1. Communication

Communication is a broad topic, so it’s difficult to approach it from an all-encompassing angle. A good place to start is by improving your presentation skills, which translate into everything from a kickoff meeting to pitch meetings with clients and stakeholders. The best resources I’ve seen on this are the works of Nancy Duarte. Her books, “Resonate: Present Visual Stories That Transform Audiences” (free on iBooks) and “Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations” opened my eyes to the power of an expertly executed presentation.

As you read through the books, watch for different insights you can use in presentations and other aspects of your work.

2. Leadership

Leadership is the current buzzword in the project management industry, and with good reason: If you can lead, you can deliver. But most importantly, leadership is often what is missing in the project manager’s arsenal of highly developed technical skills. If you’re a PM, I can guarantee you have felt the need to improve yourself as a leader at some point.

Thousands of resources on the subject of becoming a better leader exist. Susanne Madsen, a project management and leadership coach, has a book that’s a must-read for any project manager interested in developing their leadership skills. “The Power of Project Leadership: 7 Keys to Help You Transform from Project Manager to Project Leader” contains actionable information you can implement immediately to become a better project leader.

3. Team management

Besides leading a team from a strategic perspective, PMs also need to manage from an operational point of view. An effective team manager excels at administrating and coordinating groups of individuals by promoting teamwork, delegating tasks, resolving conflict, setting goals, and evaluating performance. Leadership is about inspiring others to walk with you; team management makes sure your team has the right shoes.

As part of the Harvard’s Pocket Mentor Series, several experts in the field cover the basics of team management, including insight on how to create a team identity, resolve conflicts, address poor team performance, and many other areas. They are a short reads, and will get you thinking about the right topics when it comes to managing teams.

4. Negotiation

When we discuss communication as a key skill for PMs—a majority of this is in relation to their responsibility of handling negotiations of the use of resources, budgets, schedules, scope creep, and a variety of other compromises that are unavoidable. Knowing how to negotiate well so that all parties are satisfied is a key skill for the successful PM.

I read “Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In” a couple of years ago and was impressed at how authors Roger Fisher and William Ury were able to explain the inner workings of negotiations, and how to make the most out of this unavoidable experience.

5. Personal organization

Have you ever heard that you cannot give what you do not have? How can you get things done and organize work for other people if your own personal life and projects are disorganized and going nowhere? Get organized personally, and you will immediately improve as a project manager.

I read David Allen’s “Getting Things Done” a few years ago, and that was a pivotal point in my life. I was already a PM then, but was going nowhere with my career, and my work was not up to the standards it is today. This book helped me get my life and my commitments under control.

6. Risk management

During my “Project Management for You” podcast series, I interviewed top-notch PMs and asked them about their go-to project management tool or technique. One of the more surprising recurring suggestions was to focus on risk management. They are absolutely right: If you can predict and create solutions to issues before they arise, you increase your chances of delivering projects successfully. Risks are often not considered until they cause something to go wrong; as a result, many PMs fail to consider risks as seriously as they should.

“Managing Uncertainty: Strategies for Surviving and Thriving in Turbulent Times” by Michel Syrett and Marion Devine is a great introduction to navigating around risky environments in project management.

Project management is a job that demands a varied and vast skill set. Start by honing your practices in each skill set, and keep adding and incorporating them into your work. I hope you continue working on becoming the best project manager you can be.
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7 Secrets of Highly Productive Project Managers

BY SUSANNE MADSEN

I recently went to Romania to run a two-day leadership workshop for project managers. I was looking forward to understanding how their project management challenges might be different to those of other countries; instead, I found that they weren't different at all! From the automotive industry in Romania, to manufacturing in Denmark, banking in the U.K., and software development in the U.S., ultra-lean company cultures are putting pressure on project managers to do more with less.

Project managers are essentially being asked to run more projects with fewer people. This demand challenges the community, and sharpens our productivity saw.

To help you step up and do more with less, check out these seven secrets of highly productive project managers below.

1. Create a task list at day’s end.

There’s no doubt that highly productive project managers prioritize the most important tasks and activities from the moment they start work in the morning. Having such a laser focus is only possible because they have written up a clear list of priorities at the end of the previous work day.

If you wait until the morning to capture your top priorities, it will take you longer to regain momentum. Furthermore, you’ll easily get distracted by incoming emails and other requests that aren’t as important. Creating a task list before ending your work day will help you to put the important over the urgent right from the beginning of your day.

2. Eat lots of frogs in the morning.

This is an antidote for procrastinating and fretting over work you’re not doing. The frog is a metaphor used by Brian Tracy, which symbolizes the ugly but important task that you keep putting off. What you want to do is eat the ugliest frog first thing in the morning, as your brain is most alert at this time.

So, if you know you’ve got a dreaded task in front of you, set aside 60 – 90 minutes of uninterrupted time to take care of frog business. One great result is that it frees you from thinking about what you’re procrastinating on. Then, you can feel more relaxed about any interruptions and unexpected meetings that crop up during the remainder of the day, because you made headway on your frogs earlier in the day.

3. Check email less frequently.

A few years ago I was running a project leadership master class for a major organization. In the class, I recommended that participants limit the amount of times they checked email so it wouldn’t dictate the flow of their day. There was some reluctance to this idea, because people felt their clients and colleagues expected them to quickly respond.

Luckily, one of the senior managers came to my rescue. He told us that for a long while he had been checking his email only three times a day, and that his productivity had increased dramatically. What a great testimony to our third productivity secret! I encourage you to follow his advice, and reduce the number of times that you check your email. Try turning it off for short periods of time, so you’re not distracted by notifications.

4. Name the real issues.

Being highly productive isn’t just about eating frogs and avoiding distractions. It’s also about being able to have difficult conversations, and name the real issues so that the project can move forward. Highly productive project managers aren’t afraid of highlighting risks and issues. They know that this is the only way to get senior managers to help move the project forward and to build trust in their leadership.

To move issues forward, take every effort to talk about the project’s real risks to stakeholders, and provide recommendations on how to address each item. No one is interested in problems, so focus on the way forward. To support your recommendations, provide an impact analysis of each option, and give the senior managers sufficient information to make a decision.

5. Hold effective project meetings.

Another secret of highly productive PMs is that they take control of meetings, and optimize the time they spend in them by clearly defining what outcomes they want up front. You can hold effective project meetings by setting and sticking to a clear agenda, and then writing up actions and agreements with individual owners within 24 hours of the meeting.

Another tip is to ask attendees to “check in” and “check out” of each meeting. When participants check in, have them share what they’d like to get from the meeting and what is presently going on for them, e.g. if they’re feeling absent minded due to a production issue. When participants check out, have them state if their purpose for the meeting was met or not. If you use project management software, use the tool to facilitate meetings.

6. Enable the team to help out.

The sixth secret is to spread the workload in a way that engages the team and enables the project manager to lead rather than get involved in all the detailed work. You can do this by involving the team in defining and linking off the project, and by planning it collaboratively. This is by far the best way to gain people’s buy in and commitment to the project.

No one likes to do simply what they’re told, so make sure that defining the work and assigning roles and responsibilities is a team effort.

You can also enable the team to help out by delegating. This means that you delegate work that motivates and stretches the team members, while at the same time it frees you up to focus on the 20 percent of activities that add to 80 percent of your project’s results.

7. Work with a mentor or a coach.

The most dedicated and highly productive PMs know work with either a mentor or a coach on a regular basis. They use this person as a sounding board and a guide to help them overcome issues, and stay focused on the most important aspects of the project.

In my project management coaching work, I had one client I worked with for over a year. In that time, she’s increased her influencing skills and improved her focus on value-adding activities. Consequently, she has flourished in her new job, and even gained a promotion within a very short amount of time.

We all want to feel productive and know that our work makes a difference. You can employ any of these seven secrets to get things done and join the club of the most productive project managers out there. Don’t sit back and wait for things to happen. Be proactive and take action, now!
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How to Build Strong Relationships with Stakeholders

BY SUSANNE MADSEN

The project management industry has put a lot of focus in recent years on the importance of stakeholder relationships. Project management practitioners and leading thinkers in the field have emphasized that a good project manager isn’t just someone who is good at keeping track of all the upcoming tasks. A good PM is also someone who can balance stakeholder needs and interests, and ensure that all parties pull together and support the project in delivering a valuable outcome.

But how does the project manager make this happen?

1. Understand who the stakeholders are.

The first step in building great relationships with project stakeholders is to understand who they are. Many projects get delayed or end up not delivering the value they promised because the PM failed to identify and engage all of the stakeholders. This means that essential requirements, needs or insights might have been overlooked.

To find out who all the stakeholders could be, brainstorm groups and individuals who have an interest in the project or who will be affected by it. Whenever you identify a stakeholder, ask them if there’s anyone else they believe you need to speak to. Keep going until you’re sure you have identified all of them.

2. Pinpoint stakeholders with high levels of power and influence.

If you’re leading a large project, you won’t be able to spend an equal amount of time with every stakeholder. Naturally, you will have to engage and learn about every group or person you have identified, but the people you need to concentrate your efforts on are those with the most power and influence.

Look at all the stakeholders on your list and assess who the three to five most impactful people are, i.e.: Those who have the power to define your project, who can affect its direction and who can help move it forward. Always make sure that your relationships with these influential decision-makers are the best that they can be.

3. Engage in one-to-one conversation.

Building great relationships isn’t about the amount of time you spend with someone, but about the quality of that time. Consider for instance how many people you interact with in meetings, without knowing much about them. Great relationships are built through one-to-one conversations where you can find out more about what makes each person tick. Stakeholders are busy people, so respect their time by keeping your discussions as short as possible.

Come prepared and let them know that the purpose of the meeting is to uncover anything that can help the project be successful—including how the two of you will be working together.

4. Seek to understand their world.

At the most fundamental level, project stakeholders will only open up to you and trust you when they feel that you understand them and have their best interests at heart. Your most important task is to inquire about their stake in the project, their requirements and any knowledge or experience they have that can help deliver an outcome that adds more value.

Ask stakeholders what a successful project looks like in their eyes, such as:

- What their hopes and concerns are
- How they would like you to keep them updated throughout the project
- If a weekly status report will suffice, or
- They’d prefer a regular phone call

Be curious and find out as much as you can about each person and their communication preferences.

5. Communicate with clarity and honesty.

To deepen the level of trust between you and each stakeholder, it’s imperative that you communicate with clarity and honesty and that you don’t sweep anything under the rug. Your stakeholders want to know what the true state of the project is, how it affects them, and if there is anything they can do to help.

Send out weekly or bi-monthly status reports with an executive summary, an overview of which milestones are complete and which are still outstanding. Include the project’s top five risks and issues with actions and owners. Similarly, conduct a monthly steering committee presentation where you talk about the real status of the project and what support you need from the committee members, if any, to overcome roadblocks and move the project forward.

6. Continuously demonstrate your competence.

Building good relationships with project stakeholders is not a one-off exercise or something that only happens at the beginning of the project. Continuously walking your talk and delivering on your promises will help you to further develop each relationship.

This can be done by demonstrating that you are a reliable and competent PM—someone who is skilled at defining the project, locking down a scope, creating a realistic plan, capturing requirements, managing risks, tracking the budget, and understanding the context of the business you are operating in. You can also demonstrate your competence by keeping meetings on track, capturing agreements and decisions, and holding people accountable for their actions.

Excellent stakeholder relationships can be built through one-to-one conversations where you take an interest in each person’s world, and help them get their needs fulfilled through the project. Be as open and honest as you can in your communication, and treat your stakeholders like a valued client who you would like to be of service to.
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How Do I Measure the Success (or Failure) of My Project?

BY ELIZABETH HARRIN

"Dear Elizabeth: I want to get better at measuring the success (or failure) of my projects. What project management metrics should I be focusing on? And how can I use these metrics to improve project performance?"*

OK, I don't mean to start off by being controversial, but you're asking the wrong person.

It's your project stakeholders who decide if your project is a success or a failure. So what you should be asking is: how will they judge me?

Do they care if you are late by a few weeks as long as you deliver something of supreme quality? Is it essential that you deliver on time, on budget, and to the specified scope, and they will still be unhappy. I don't want situation where you are ahead–you have less work to do overall.

Whatever you choose to measure, make sure you interpret it intelligently and use your professional judgment to help uncover what really means for your project. Then you can explain it to your team, use the data in a helpful way, and make better decisions about how to manage your project.

When it comes to metrics, it's the context that makes the knowledge valuable. Knowing you are six percent ahead of schedule is meaningless without some narrative that explains why. Perhaps you just cut a huge portion out of your scope, so it's obvious that you are ahead–you have less work to do overall.

When people want to make a lot of changes, it means you didn't really know what you were doing upfront. That might be an issue for you. It depends on the methodology you are using. Agile methods tend to be more flexible in dealing with change. Waterfall development methodologies are less good at coping with change to the extent that adding more changes late in the project can be very costly. Either way, tracking trends on the volumes of change requests will let you spot if it's worth taking a deep dive into requirements or your backlog again.

Try these:

**Schedule Variance:** Plot your baseline project schedule. Then track your actual performance. Measure the difference between where you thought you'd be and where you actually are. This can be represented as a discrete number of days ahead of schedule."

("We're 10 days behind.") or a percentage ("We're 6 percent ahead of schedule.").

**Cost Variance:** This is the same principle as schedule variance. First, establish your budget baseline. Then, track what you actually spend and compare the two. You'll end up over- or underspent (it's rare that you'll be exactly spent in line with your baseline, but good for you if that happens). You can represent this as a fixed price ("We're underspent by $5,000.") or a percentage ("We're 10 percent over budget.").

To know if your stakeholders are happy with the project, try to measure these:

**Number of Change Requests:** This useful measure offers an indication of how good your requirements were at the beginning. When people want to make a lot of changes, it means you didn't really know what you were doing upfront. That might be an issue for you. It depends on the methodology you are using. Agile methods tend to be more flexible in dealing with change. Waterfall development methodologies are less good at coping with change to the extent that adding more changes late in the project can be very costly. Either way, tracking trends on the volumes of change requests will let you spot if it's worth taking a deep dive into requirements or your backlog again.

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"When it comes to metrics, it's the context that makes the knowledge valuable."
How Do I Measure the Success (or Failure) of My Project?

BY ELIZABETH HARRIN

“Dear Elizabeth: I want to get better at measuring the success (or failure) of my projects. What project management metrics should I be focusing on? And how can I use these metrics to improve project performance?”

OK. I don’t mean to start off by being controversial, but you’re asking the wrong person.

It’s your project stakeholders who decide if your project is a success or a failure. So what you should be asking is: how will they judge me?

Do they care if you are late by a few weeks as long as you deliver something of supreme quality? Is it essential that you hit the delivery milestone by any means possible, even if that means sacrificing a few bits of functionality?

You can measure time taken to fix defects, number of change requests, deviation from schedule baseline, percent complete, burn rate, or anything else you want. These measures will give you some interesting management information, and might help you manage the team. But if your sponsor is unhappy in the end, she won’t feel any better about it.

You need to stay close to the expectations of your project decision makers. Keep checking in with them, and seeing if their definition of success has changed. Talk to them often and tell them how you are doing against meeting the targets they set with you, and the targets they think are important.

At the end of the day, the stakeholders decide if you met their needs and if the project did what they wanted. You can deliver something on time, on budget, and to the specified scope, and they will still be unhappy. I don’t want situation for you. So check it out with them in advance, and tailor what you measure to their expectations.

That will give you clarity on what success (or failure) looks like, and how best to track it. But for your project management purposes, you probably want some other metrics to go on.

Performance metrics help you see how the team is doing and let you spot where there might be problems. If this is the first time you’ve really focused on measuring project performance, don’t make it too complicated. People hold up Earned Value as the way to go for the ultimate in performance tracking, but it’s overkill for most projects.

Try these:

Schedule Variance: Plot your baseline project schedule. Then track your actual performance. Measure the difference between where you thought you’d be and where you actually are. This can be represented as a discrete number of days. This is the same principle as schedule variance. Plot your baseline project schedule. Then track your actual performance. Measure the difference between where you thought you’d be and where you actually are.

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How to Run Effective Meetings: Lessons from Pixar, Apple, and Amazon

BY SAMANTHA SAUER

Every day, millions of Americans lose precious minutes of their lives to meetings. Boring, unproductive meetings.

Harvard Business School professor Nancy Koehn estimates that Americans attend 11 million formal meetings every day, about 4 billion meetings a year. And over half of the people her team surveyed said the meetings were unproductive. Ouch.

Don’t despair just yet. Forward-thinking executives have found ways to make their meetings more productive, cost-effective, and efficient. Borrow some of their strategies for making meetings less of a timesuck:

To get the best ideas, invite candor and constructive criticism into your meeting room.

It's a common refrain echoed in many corporate rooms around America: leave criticism and negative feedback at the door. The idea was first championed by Alex Osborn, an advertising executive who pioneered the brainstorm.

While Pixar president Ed Catmull uses the word candor to describe his meeting style, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos's style could be described as confrontational. One of Amazon's Leadership Principles sums it up: “Leaders are obligated to respectfully challenge decisions when they disagree, even when doing so is uncomfortable or exhausting.”

Bezos is well known for hating “social cohesion,” our human tendency to seek agreement and consensus. Like Catmull, he encourages his employees to call out bad ideas, disagree, and challenge each other.

In your next meeting, encourage open dialogue and embrace candor (and maybe even a little conflict). Don’t be afraid to debate ideas, ask questions, and push ideas toward excellence.

Catmull has built a culture where people feel free to share their ideas, opinions and even criticisms. In his book “Creativity, Inc.,” Catmull writes that candor is the key to Pixar’s success. Rather than checking opinions and criticism at the door, Catmull encourages his team to embrace and share them.

He writes, “Candor could not be more crucial to our creative process. Why? Because early on, all of our movies suck. That’s a blunt assessment, I know, but I choose that phrasing because saying it in a softer way fails to convey how bad the first versions really are. I’m not trying to be modest or self-effacing. Pixar films are not good at first, and our job is to make them so—to go, as I say, ‘from suck to not-suck.’”

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Keep it small, smart, and simple. (Or, would two pizzas feed everyone in this meeting?)

In his book “Insanely Simple,” longtime Steve Jobs collaborator Ken Segall tells the story of a weekly meeting with Apple’s ad agency. Jobs had just begun the meeting when he noticed someone new. “Who are you?” he asked. When her answer didn’t suffice, Jobs replied, “I don’t think we need you in this meeting. Thanks.” As she collected her belongings, Jobs continued the meeting as if nothing had happened.

This principle of keeping meetings small is part of Jobs’ larger focus on Simplicity, one of the driving forces behind Apple. “When he called a meeting or reported to a meeting, his expectation was that everyone in the room would be an essential participant. Spectators were not welcome,” Segall writes.

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos follows the Two Pizza Rule. When you’re creating a meeting invitation, consider the number of people you can feed with two pizzas. That’s the most you should invite.

The idea is that smaller teams can help reduce groupthink, wasted time, and watered down ideas. Keep it small, simple, and don’t let anyone go hungry.

Ban presentations and replace bullet points with narrative.

Jeff Bezos doesn’t have time for PowerPoint presentations. He’d much rather read a 6-page memo.

Seriously. Executive team meetings at Amazon begin with everyone absorbing the written word — sometimes for 30 minutes. These memos, which the executives call “narratives”, have four main elements:

1. The context or question.
2. Approaches to answer the question — by whom, by which method, and their conclusions.
3. How is your attempt at answering the question different or the same from previous approaches?
4. Now what? — that is, what’s in it for the customer, the company, and how does the answer to the question enable innovation on behalf of the customer?

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While it would be easy to quickly gloss over these points in a presentation, writing a structured narrative requires the author to form coherent thoughts, dig deep into the subject, anticipate tough questions, and formulate responses. The narratives also give everyone a chance to be heard, especially those who prefer to “speak” through writing rather than an oral presentation.

If you start asking your team for 6-page memos before every meeting, you could have a mutiny on your hands. But, you can encourage your team to spend less time creating beautiful presentations and more time on thinking through the real meat of the subject they’re addressing.

More Meeting Tips from Executives

Here are some additional tips from America’s top executives:

Have a stated purpose or agenda. Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer requires an agenda in advance of every meeting. By sending it in advance, participants can prepare, know what will be discussed, and see if they’re relevant to the meeting versus being part of a blanket invite. Sticking to prepared agendas during meetings helps attendees focus on the goal and what needs to be achieved.

Create a list of action items at the end of every meeting. The follow-up memo was a go-to tool for Alfred Sloan, who ran GM from the 1920s to the 50s. After each meeting, he would send a memo to all participants that outlined decisions made, action items, deadlines, and the executives responsible for each item.

Set an end time. Constraints, deadlines, and limitations often lead to bursts of creativity, while a meeting with no end leads to... well, not much. Need help keeping yourself accountable? Try setting a timer.
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In his book “Your Creative Power” he writes, “Creativity is so delicate a flower that praise tends to make it bloom while discouragement often nips it in the bud.”

While it sounds good in theory, many researchers have argued that this approach often results in fewer ideas and less creativity. Ed Catmull, president of Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios, would agree.

Catmull has built a culture where people feel free to share their ideas, opinions and even criticisms. In his book “Creativity, Inc.”, Catmull writes that candor is the key to Pixar’s success. Rather than checking opinions and criticism at the door, Catmull encourages his team to embrace and share them.

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Chapter Two

Leading Your Team
The Difference Between Managing and Leading

BY SUSANNE MADSEN

As a project leadership coach, speaker and trainer, my primary job is to help project managers improve their performance and well-being. I work with PMs so they can manage their projects more efficiently; build stronger relationships with their stakeholders; motivate their team and increase individual confidence. And invariably, we end up talking about the differences between managing and leading. One of the biggest differentiators between an average and a high-performing project manager is around the degree to which they lead a team versus just managing it.

Managing “Push”

Most project managers I come across are managing the project, not leading it. This means that they are very rational and task-oriented. They focus on events and processes such as calculating effort, estimating duration, allocating resources, reporting progress, etc.

And the way in which they manage the team is one based on authority, to the tune of: “As the project manager I have authority over my team members. They should do as I tell them and report on a project, but scale back your managerial approach. Leaders understand what it is that makes each person tick, and can show individuals how their strengths fit into the bigger picture. Leaders are more visionary and inspirational, and not so focused on being skill-centric.

Another way of looking at the comparison is that management is very finite and definite. There is often a right and a wrong process to follow, and the manager upholds that. Leadership, by contrast, is much more open. Leaders ask questions, and listen to and empower people instead of just telling them what’s expected of them.

Leadership “Pull”

Leadership, on the other hand, is quite different, mainly because it’s more people-focused. Leaders don’t typically tell people what to do. Instead, leaders motivate team members by appealing to them at an individual level and by inspiring them to contribute to the overall vision. We call this a “pull” approach. Leaders understand what it is that makes each person tick, and can show individuals how their strengths fit into the bigger picture. Leaders are more visionary and inspirational, and not so focused on being skill-centric.

As a rule of thumb, you should manage tasks, events and processes, and lead people.

As you become more familiar with this non-transactional way of interacting with people, the process will come more naturally to you and you’ll find that you start to take a bigger picture of how you can better motivate the individual.

The Managing “Push”

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There’s a big overlap between management and leadership, and in many situations we should make use of both approaches. Here’s a table that illustrates which style should be most predominant depending on the activity you do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
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The Leadership–Manager Overlap

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Example, ask team members what they enjoy doing, what ideas they have for how the team can work more effectively, and involve them in the decisions that affect them. Set up one-on-one meetings for their benefit—not yours—and make a real effort to listen more than you speak.

Improve Your Leadership Skills

So how do you flex your leadership skills? Here’s an exercise that will hone your leadership muscles. To start, choose a person on your team that you can comfortably practice with. Here’s the rundown:

1. Schedule an ideas meeting. Start off by scheduling a meeting where the agenda is not related to a specific task or work assignment, but where you have a conversation about the bigger picture. When you are managing you will typically ask the team member if they have completed the tasks you assigned them, and see what might be holding them back. But in this meeting, you want a different kind of agenda—one where you ask questions concerning ideas, goals and how the team member sees his role in the project’s vision.

The purpose of this meeting is to build trust and to find out how you can better motivate the individual.

Explain what the meeting is about. When you meet with your team member, let him know right off that the purpose of the meeting is to take the opportunity to look at the bigger picture and how he fits into it. Say that you would like to get a better understanding of how he can contribute to the project’s successes. Remember that this is a meeting as much for your team member’s benefit as yours, so make sure you give plenty of time to discuss views and ideas.

Ask open-ended questions. Have a general conversation about the project, the team member’s role and what she feels can be improved. Try not to steer the conversation too much but be open to the possibility that it could take an unexpected turn. As a starting point, you can ask any of the following questions:

- How do you feel the project is going?
- Which projects risks do you worry about?
- Which part of your job do you enjoy the most?
- What suggestions do you have for how we can improve the project?
- How can I better support you to do a good job?

Practice, Practice, Practice

As you become more familiar with this non-transactional way of interacting with people, the process will come more naturally to you and you’ll find that you start to take a bigger interest in the people-side of the project. After all, it’s people who deliver projects, not processes.
The Difference Between Managing and Leading

BY SUSANNE MADSEN

As a project leadership coach, speaker and trainer, my primary job is to help project managers improve their performance and well-being. I work with PMs so they can manage their projects more efficiently; build stronger relationships with their stakeholders; motivate their team and increase individual confidence.

And invariably, we end up talking about the differences between managing and leading. One of the biggest differentiators between an average and a high-performing project manager is around the degree to which they lead a team versus just managing it.

The Managing “Push”

Most project managers I come across are managing the project, not leading it. This means that they are very rational and task-oriented. They focus on events and processes such as calculating effort, estimating duration, allocating resources, reporting progress, etc.

And the way in which they manage the team is one based on authority, to the tune of: “As the project manager I have authority over my team members. They should do as I tell them because that’s what they get paid for.” This is a “push” approach. Managers generally tell people what to do.

The Leadership “Pull”

Leadership, on the other hand, is quite different. Leaders understand what it is that makes each person tick, and can show individuals how their strengths fit into the bigger picture. Leaders are more visionary and inspirational, and not so focused on being skill-centric.

Another way of looking at the comparison is that management is very finite and definite. There is often a right way to do things, and a wrong process to follow, and the manager upholds that. Leadership, by contrast, is much more open. Leaders ask questions, and listen to and empower people instead of just telling them what’s expected of them.

Manage Tasks, Lead People

I’m not advocating that one is better than the other, or that project managers should stop managing and only lead. Far from it! As project managers we need both. The issue is that most project managers only manage; they never lead. And we need a healthy balance between the two approaches.

As a rule of thumb, you should manage tasks, events and processes, and lead people.

So continue to be skills-focused when you estimate, plan and report on a project, but scale back your managerial mindset when it comes to team meetings, one-on-one’s and motivating the individual. Be more open and have a more people-centric approach when leadership is required. For example, ask team members what they enjoy doing, what ideas they have for how the team can work more effectively, and involve them in the decisions that affect them. Set up one-on-one meetings for their benefit—not yours—and make a real effort to listen more than you speak.

The Leadership-Manager Overlap

There’s a big overlap between management and leadership, and in many situations we should make use of both approaches. Here’s a table that illustrates which style should be most predominant depending on the activity you do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Leader</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimating and planning the project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyzing requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assigning work to individual team members</td>
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<td>Preparing for Steering Committee Meetings</td>
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<td>Conducting Steering Committee meetings</td>
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<td>Conducting team meetings and one-to-one catch ups</td>
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<td>Motivating the team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuously improving the project and delivering real value to the customer</td>
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11 Ways to Build the Strengths of Your Team

BY TIM CLARK

In order to lead a top-performing team, you need to do more than direct and delegate work. Truly effective managers are able to recognize the unique strengths of each team member, and optimize all those natural gifts. If you’re in a leadership position, it might sound like a daunting task, but it’s not.

The first step is paying attention, identifying each person’s strength and then managing around those essential skills. The results include increased productivity, improved performance, and higher employee engagement and retention.

Benefits of Focusing on Strengths

Research from the Gallup Organization’s State of the American Workplace found that building on employee strengths is much more effective in raising performance than trying to improve weaknesses.

Gallup also found that when employees become aware of their strengths, they become 7.8 percent more productive. Teams that focus on strengths every day have 12.5 percent greater productivity, while individuals who use their strengths, they become 7.8 percent more productive.

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Project managers are in the best position to recognize the strengths of their team members. And managers can empower employees to discover and develop their strengths, and then place them in roles where they can excel.

Here are 11 ways to build on the strengths of your employees:

1. Name the strengths.

Don’t assume that employees know their strengths. People often take their most powerful talents for granted. Meet individually with team members to discuss how they—and you—see their core competencies and strengths. Name each strength out loud, and ask how those strengths might apply to your project.

2. Apply individual strengths to achieve the team’s overall goals.

Help your team understand each other’s strengths and how these talents unite to create a powerful picture and improve teamwork skills. Speak to the strengths of individual team members in the presence of project compatriots. Suggest how the team might take advantage of others’ strengths, and hear what the team has to say. And why stop there?

Look beyond your projects to the wider organization to see whether demonstrated strengths can benefit neglected areas of the broader business.

3. Assign team projects based on employees’ strengths.

You would never intentionally assign tasks based on weaknesses, but you might overlook strengths unless they’re surfaced.

4. Incorporate strengths into performance conversations and reviews.

Help employees set goals based on their core competencies and strengths.

5. Help employees align their strengths with the expectations and responsibilities of their roles.

In the best case situations, team members’ strengths should align with expectations; but sometimes things go a little off course. Make sure you nurture and guide individuals to focus on their core strengths, and then give them goals that align with their talent and responsibilities. You’ll have more contented team members, too.

6. Ask your organization for some “strength training.”

Invest in a course to hone skills that identify and optimize the strength of your team members. This type of training may be something your HR department can deliver. Alternatively, you might—with your company’s support—find training outside of your organization.

7. Open career growth opportunities or training for your team.

Tell team members that if they have a strength they’d like to develop, you’re willing to support them. This encouragement may motivate employees to actively discover their strengths, and do what they need to develop their professional skills.

8. Offer training opportunities for employees who show strength in particular areas.

Instead of waiting for team members to come to you, you approach them. Let them know what qualities you see in them, and make sure that they’re willing to build on these strengths for a specific type of career path by sending them to a course or training program. You don’t want to invest in anyone who’s unwilling to put in the effort to utilize their strength to benefit the organization.

9. Encourage team members to act as “strengths advocates” to help others use their talents and gifts more fully.

Rally your team to be budding leaders and motivators in their roles as team members.

10. Consider cross training among teammates who have specific strengths.

Form mentoring relationships by matching strong employees with teammates who show a weakness in a corresponding area. This cross-training lets strong employees develop their training abilities, while the mentees receive some good modeling and a chance to strengthen their skills.

11. Allow strong employees to take responsibility for their own career opportunities through special assignments or off-site activities.

Let your staff decide whether to pursue these activities, even if it means shuffling tasks on your project. Don’t push. Developing strength starts with initiative and drive. If an employee doesn’t have either, then it might not be worth the investment.

There are other side benefits to developing your teams’ individual competencies. Watching team members grow into their roles and develop their skills can be one of the most rewarding experiences in a career.

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7 Ways to Improve Team Performance

BY AMANDA KELLY

Mae West once said, “An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises.” Real success results from a combination of talent, innovation, effort and commitment. Here are seven factors that positively influence team performance, and tips for incorporating them into your workplace.

Support Innovation
To stay ahead, innovation is necessary. The most successful businesses are those that remain flexible and innovative, and build on current successes without consistently overtaxing their teams. It can be difficult to demand innovation and creativity, but you can help set up a workplace that supports them. Ideas flow more readily in a relaxed and agile work environment.

Allow team members to work when they feel most productive, whether that’s the middle of the night or 5 A.M. Encourage regular breaks and informal brainstorming sessions. Celebrate breakthroughs, and don’t get hung up on attempts that didn’t succeed.

Be a Strong Leader
Innovation comes from inspiration. Teams must be led by managers that go beyond balancing budgets and schedules. The strongest leaders set goals, priorities and roles for their teams, and encourage each team member to achieve their personal best while keeping strategic goals in mind. Leaders must be clear on their vision, know where the team is going, and have a clear idea of how individual efforts lead to accomplishing important strategic goals. If done well, leadership can create a culture of continuous improvements to productivity. Leaders should be open to new ideas, and willing to take risks in order to reach higher performance levels.

Hire the Right People
Hiring well can be the single greatest factor in contributing to a company’s success. The right person will bring not just a particular skill set or knowledge base, but will be a solid addition to drive forward your company’s vision and values. That’s why it’s important to include vision and values during the hiring and interview process. Ask the right questions to get the information you need to know. And make sure the appropriate people get looped into the process. Research shows that candidates who interview with their potential team mates and high-level managers have more success right out of the starting gate. Thinking in terms of retention and innovation and how this person will fit before sending the job offer will result in a collaborative team whose skills and vision meet and strengthen each other.

Keep Learning
Productivity increases when team members have all the skills they need to succeed. If you identify someone with great enthusiasm who lacks practical skills, encourage them to take an online course or seek mentoring from a colleague with more expertise. Be sure your team knows you expect skill development, and that no one should rest on their laurels.

Letting employees stretch their wings and take on new and different roles creates a culture of support for learning and innovation. Have a graphic designer interested in writing copy? Give him/her a chance to brainstorm with the marketing department. A project manager with a flair for event planning? Offer the chance to be part of planning the company picnic. Small changes to roles can fuel enthusiasm.

Streamline Processes
The start of a new year is a great time to step back and take a look at process integration in the workplace. Streamlining processes between teams and departments can go a long way towards maximizing productivity. Part of any process integration effort should focus on breaking down obvious silos and barriers in order to help groups and individuals feel more connected to the greater whole.

Part of innovation and enhanced productivity comes from fine tuning existing processes and roles. Ask your team for their thoughts on ways to streamline processes, and encourage brainstorming around process alignment.

Build Commitment
Use your company’s leadership around vision and values to build employee commitment. A competitive business plan and strategy are important, yet a company culture that celebrates innovation and dedication to that vision and strategy will do as much to motivate employees.

Recognize team members who go the extra mile and are willing to take risks on implementing new ideas.

Clear communication is paramount. Team communications should be transparent and factual. Employees whose ideas and concerns are listened to—and acted upon by management—will feel connected and part of the decision making process. Feeling part of goes a long way toward building commitment and dedication.

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 involve the Team in Resource Management
When you involve appropriate team members in the resource allocation process, you create a spirit of collaboration on important decisions. Plus, you probably get more accurate outcomes when resources are being managed by the person who is most knowledgeable in their area.

Prioritize project resources based on what is most critical to the company’s mission; always stay focused on strategic vision and planning. If team members propose a change in priorities, and have access to metrics to back up their case, hear them out. By including teams in resource allocation can go a long way toward company-wide buy-in for decisions.

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How to Navigate Your Team Through a Transition

BY SUSANNE MADSEN

If you’ve ever tried to be a change agent at work, you know the kind of resistance you’re up against. You could be recommending a new work process or project management tool that will greatly improve the business—and you’ll champion it—and people will suddenly get very busy. Asking a team to give up a work process they’re used to—even if it’s highly flawed—and learn something new can feel overwhelming for teams that already have a lot to do.

Yet, when people do agree to a change, it’s the transition process that gets tricky.

In the world of transition management, there are three recognized phases of transition. For anyone leading a change initiative, the more you understand the practical and emotional journey that your team members might be going through, the more effectively you can shepherd your team through the transition.

Keep in mind that everyone goes through the three phases at their own speed. It’s like a marathon, where the racers spread out over time. In your case, it’s important to keep your eye on the players and help them through the process.

Here are the three phases of transition, and how acknowledging each one can help you have your own successful transition to a new and better way of working.

Phase 1: Letting Go
The first phase of transition is letting go of the existing process or tool. At a practical level this is about finishing outstanding tasks and phasing out any work done under the old regime. But there’s a lot more going on at the emotional level. Team members may mourn the loss of a system or a process that they’re used to. No matter how limiting or problematic the outgoing system, people understand it, and feel safe using it. And most of us like to operate within our comfort zone—even if this limits growth or evolution opportunities.

Tips for getting through:
Show as much empathy as you can. Acknowledge how your team members feel about the change, and help them come to terms with giving up a system they’ve come to depend on. Be aware that people can get stuck in phase one if you don’t listen to them or take their concerns seriously. It’s going to be harder for some people to experience a change to their daily routine. So take the time to understand what people are going through, and ask them how they feel.

Phase 2: Passing Over Uncertainty
In the second phase people have let go of the old and are actively working toward the change. Now you have people implementing the new process or new software tool. But things haven’t quite settled or solidified yet. Team members continue to navigate the uncertainty between what was, and the emergence of the new rules of the road. There are still many questions, which can be frustrating for those who like predictability and routine.

Tips for getting through:
Acknowledge the ambiguity that exists while implementing strategies to bridge the gap from old to new. You can do this by openly recognizing that some questions are still unanswered, and by inviting the team to help answer them. It’s not up to the team leader alone to define the new processes and resolve issues, but for the team as a collective

Phase 3: The New Beginning
This “New Beginning” phase happens when the change has been fully accepted and is operating effectively within the new environment. Team members are emotionally on board and are creating new, sustainable habits. A new comfort zone is emerging that needs strengthening so that people don’t revert back to phase two.

Tips for getting through:
To support team members through the New Beginning phase, it’s important that you reinforce and sustain the change through people, systems and processes. Collaborate with individual team members to set short-term goals that are easy to achieve, and that generate quick wins. It’s incredibly rewarding to see tangible results. Don’t let up too early as on-going progress is necessary to keep the momentum.

To make the change stick, embed it into your corporate culture and the organization’s day-to-day work—if you can. Continue to empower and engage people, by making them feel part of your new process. Encourage them to organize trainings and workshops, or to give feedback on improvements to the new system. Make people feel like their contribution is part of the team’s success—this alone will make a big difference!

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Tips for getting through:

Acknowledge the ambiguity that exists while implementing strategies to bridge the gap from old to new. You can do this by openly recognizing that some questions are still unanswered, and by inviting the team to help answer them. It’s not up to the team leader alone to define the new processes and resolve issues, but for the team as a collective.

Phase 3: The New Beginning

This “New Beginning” phase happens when the change has been fully accepted and is operating effectively within the new environment. Team members are emotionally on board and are creating new, sustainable habits. A new comfort zone is emerging that needs strengthening so that people don’t revert back to phase two.

Tips for getting through:

To support team members through the New Beginning phase, it’s important that you reinforce and sustain the change through people, systems and processes. Collaborate with individual team members to set short-term goals that are easy to achieve, and that generate quick wins. It’s incredibly rewarding to see tangible results. Don’t let up too early as on-going progress is necessary to keep the momentum.

To make the change stick, embed it into your corporate culture and the organization’s day-to-day work—if you can. Continue to empower and engage people, by making them feel part of your new process. Encourage them to organize trainings and workshops, or to give feedback on improvements to the new system. Make people feel like their contribution is part of the team’s success—this alone will make a big difference!

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7 Steps to Build a Continuous Improvement Culture

BY ANDY CROWE

After World War II, new theories about quality began to surface. Many of these ideas were brought to Japan and embraced by the country as it rebuilt in the years after the war. These ideas would ultimately change manufacturing and the world.

“Continuous improvement” was one of these ideas. The Japanese distilled the essence of this idea to a single word: “kaizen.” It is a quality philosophy that includes improvement of the product, the processes the design and produce them, and the way the teams carry out those processes.

For example, the old way would take a product, get it into its category, optimize the process, and sit back and make money. In fact, we even talk about mature products as being a “cash cow.” Or, something you milk for cash as long as it produces.

Kaizen, however, is part of a different way of looking at things. A product or a process will likely never be “good enough.” As the name implies, the goal is to never stop improving.

This idea can make a tremendous difference in the product you manufacture today and how you do it. But what if your company doesn’t practice kaizen? In this article, we will explore seven ways to create a culture of continuous improvement in your organization—even if you’re starting from scratch.

It’s important to remember that changing the culture of an organization is notoriously difficult. Companies are (in)famous for starting an initiative and then quietly abandoning it, and that is especially true for something like continuous improvement.

Kaizen is not flashy, and it’s not instantly transformative. It takes time to implement, and the benefits realization can sometimes be agonizingly slow.

This isn’t just some new initiative. It’s a culture change, and changing the culture is one of the most difficult things a leader can undertake.

In the 1990s movie “What About Bob”, Bill Murray plays Bob, a man paralyzed by decisions until his psychologist suggests that he practice “baby steps.” While this strategy backfires for the psychologist, those looking to implement a culture of continuous improvement will benefit from the advice. It takes baby steps.

If you are ready to try to implement a culture of continuous improvement in your organization, these seven steps will help you get there.

1. Commit throughout the organization. That is a big part of what makes this work. It’s not just the people at the top or the bottom of an organization that make continuous improvement possible. There is no more “us and them” mentality. Everyone needs to be moving toward the same goal.

2. Make kaizen part of the new routine. At some automobile factories, small teams meet before work each week to talk about one tiny change they are going to try to implement in order to improve their process. Continuous improvement is something that needs to be a regular attention. The routine is key to sustaining it.

3. Tie it back to everyone’s job. Some people will almost certainly look at this as just one more new initiative that they simply need to outlive. To take it seriously, they may need to incentivized.

4. Measure the results. (If it’s done right, these should be positive, and these are usually cumulative). Continuous improvement is metrics-driven. This means that terms like good, bad, and better become very objective.

Continuous improvement works, but it takes time. It’s like saving money: at first, the benefits (e.g., interest) you earn is barely noticeable. But once you have enough, the interest income starts to add up. Before long, you are earning interest on your interest.

5. Communicate. Unlike some initiatives, you may not have quick wins. It will probably take time, because continuous improvement is not instantly transformative. Keep everyone aware of what is going on while you are waiting for the results to speak for themselves.

6. Be deliberate and patient. Creating a culture of continuous improvement is an exercise in demonstrating continuous improvement. You need serious commitment and sustained energy. Many of us make a practice to look for the quickest, highest value wins. Kaizen is more like the effect of oceans on the beach. It’s relentless and disciplined. It can take time to produce the results that many organizations want. A company with this kind of mindset may not be completely ready for kaizen. Also, keep this in mind: even if you have a healthy organization, it will likely be resistant to change.

7. Repeat. These are baby steps, and this is the real heart of continuous improvement. Go over these steps again and again. This is continuous; you will never really be finished.

Creating a culture of continuous improvement will not only help make the product better. It helps make the teams and the organizations better, and like compounding interest, the benefits keep coming.
Improvement Culture

BY ANDY CROWE

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Managing Your Time
Chapter Three

Managing Your Time
All projects—especially large, complex projects—need clear priorities. Easier said than done. You can count on technical projects, no matter how well-planned, to involve change orders, re-prioritization and the regular appearance of surprises. It’s just the natural order of things.

But still. Knowing how to prioritize work affects the success of your project, the engagement of your team, and your role as a leader.

One of the biggest challenges for project managers and leaders is accurately prioritizing the work that matters on a daily basis. Even if you have the best project management software on the planet, you’re the one who enters information into the tool. And, you don’t want to fall into the role of crying “top priority” for every other project that comes down the pike. Just as you have to be diligent and have the right kind of project insight to ensure that nobody’s working on yesterday’s priorities. It takes a lot of practice to get this right.

To help you manage your team’s workload and hit deadlines, here are six steps to prioritizing projects that have a lot of moving parts.

Collect a list of all your tasks
Pull together everything you could possibly consider getting done in a day. Don’t worry about the order, or the number of items up front.

Identify urgent vs. important
The next step is to see if you have any tasks that need immediate attention. We’re talking about work that, if not completed by the end of the day or in the next several hours, will have serious negative consequences (missed client deadline; missed publication or release deadlines, etc.). Check to see if there are any high-priority dependencies that rely on you finishing up a piece of work now.

Assess value
Next, look at your important work and identify what carries the highest value to your business and organization. As a general practice, you want to recognize exactly which types of tasks have top priority over the others. For example, focus on: client projects before internal work; setting up the new CEO’s computer before re-configuring the database; answering support tickets before writing training materials, and so on. Another way to assess value is to look at how many people your work impacts. In general, the more people involved or impacted, the higher the stakes.

Order tasks by estimated effort
If you have tasks that seem to tie for priority standing, check their estimates, and start on whichever one you think will take the most effort to complete. Productivity experts suggest the tactic of starting the lengthier task first. But, if you feel like you can’t focus on your meatier projects before you finish up the shorter task, then go with your gut and do that. It can be motivating to check a small task off the list before diving into deeper waters.

Be flexible and adaptable
Uncertainty and change is a given. Know that your priorities will change, and often when you least expect them to. But—and here’s the trick—you also want to stay focused on the tasks you’re committed to completing.

Know when to cut
You probably can’t get to everything on your list. After you prioritize your tasks and look at your estimates, cut the remaining tasks from your list, and focus on the priorities that you know you must and can complete for the day. Then take a deep breathe, dive in and be ready for anything.
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Ask a PM: How Can I Be More Productive?

BY ELIZABETH HARRIN

“Dear Elizabeth: It feels like I’m spending so much time just staying on top of things. I have systems, but I don’t think they are the best. Otherwise, I wouldn’t feel like I’m never getting anything done. Does that make sense? How can I be more productive when working on a project or task?”

It makes perfect sense to me! I’ve certainly had times when I’ve worked really hard and had nothing to show for it at the end of the day. They weren’t productive days, and they made me feel like I wasn’t achieving anything.

“I don’t know about you, but as a project manager, I don’t like to feel as if I’m not achieving anything. I get a buzz out of providing updates to your manager (or do them for your own benefit) as you go along.

The thing is, productivity looks different for different situations. You’ve asked about being productive on a project and also on a task, and they are different beasts. Let’s break it down.

Task Productivity

It’s hard to be productive if you don’t have a clear understanding of the requirements. I was doing some work recently where the briefing from the client was vague, I didn’t have access to the right files, and the files I did have were the wrong versions (which they told me).

I wasn’t productive when that job started, I can tell you. It took a while to get clarity on what the client wanted, how they wanted me to do it, what resources I needed access to, and who was going to give them to me.

And all the while I felt bad because I wasn’t producing anything for them.

Get complete clarity on what the task is. Even if that means asking the stupid questions, or asking the questions again and again until you get the answers you need to start work.

Then, make sure you set aside enough time to actually do the work. Most frequently, ‘unproductivity’ comes about because we are too squashed for time.

When you don’t have enough time to do the task, you start to worry about the output – will it be good enough? Can I get it done? And you don’t focus on the work that you can do.

Then, do the work. This is the most important part! If it’s a long job, document where you are, track your progress, and provide updates to your manager (or do them for your own benefit) as you go along.

I wish there was some kind of magic formula for being more productive, but at the end of the day it’s all about focus. Know what you have to do, don’t lose focus, and just get on with it.

Focus, focus, focus.

Project Productivity

Productivity sustained across a whole project is a different matter. You’ve got to facilitate the work of others. Your project needs a clear definition, just like you would need for a task. You need to think about the overall structure of the work, breaking it down into component tasks.

Then you need to structure the tasks in a way that makes sense for the flow of work, ensuring that there are realistic estimates for the work required. Those tasks need to be allocated to the people who can do them best, and who agrees that it is their job to do them.

There’s nothing more unproductive than someone who feels that a task isn’t their responsibility.

Your aim is to set up your task owners for success by helping them be productive. You’re creating a foundation for them to be able to do their work with the right resources and the right inputs (hence why it’s important to have the tasks scheduled at the right time in the flow so that prerequisite tasks are complete).

It’s a lot easier to be productive over a project or task if you enjoy the work. If you don’t enjoy what you do, you’ll find reasons not to do it, and it’s not difficult to find things that you would prefer to be spending time on!

I know it’s not realistic to love everything you have to do in the office, but the more fun you can build into your day the better it will be for you and your team members. It’s easier to get stuff done when you are hanging out with people who think about work in the same way as you do and are nice to be around.

And all the while I felt bad because I wasn’t producing anything for them.

Second, make the most of the project management tools given to you for your own personal productivity too. Track your time so that you know what you are currently spending your day on. This is incredibly important. In my experience, the most productive people know what their priorities are and work on them, without distractions. And they know how they are spending their time.

The tasks you are working on might not fit neatly within your project schedule, but you can still use enterprise project management tools to manage your personal tasks. OK, not collecting the dry cleaning. But tasks related to your work that don’t fit within a project structure, like preparing a quarterly update on the project management team’s training needs for your boss or remembering to track your monthly hours for the PMO.

With tools like LiquidPlanner, the functionality is just there: you can create new tasks, track time, and more. If you’re in a project management role, you likely have some tools that you use daily and are comfortable using. Start treating your personal To Do list like a project and track and manage it in the same way. That’s a sure way to give you clarity, keep you focused and boost productivity.

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To start with, you can use your common sense to block out your time to do your work in a productive fashion. So no social media. Put your phone on silent if you need to and turn off email pop up notifications. Get into the ‘work zone’ and set yourself up for productive success.

Second, make the most of the project management tools given to you for your own personal productivity too. Track your time so that you know what you are currently spending your day on. This is incredibly important. In my experience, the most productive people know what their priorities are and work on them, without distractions. And they know how they are spending their time.

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Boost Your Productivity with Kanban Boards

BY ANDY MAKAR

The Productivity Problem
If a project team is struggling, a common reaction is to host a daily stand-up meeting. The term “stand-up” has a wide interpretation. Many of the stand-ups I’ve attended have turned into sit-downs because the meeting lasted for an hour rather than a few minutes.

In these stand-ups, project managers typically review a project schedule, assign tasks, and discuss an open list of issues. In Agile projects, the stand-up is optimized to focus on existing work in progress, next steps, and current roadblocks. Regardless of Agile or non-Agile projects, I’ve seen teams struggle with these questions:

- Who is working on what?
- What is the status of a given task or deliverable?
- Why is the task taking so long?
- Why isn’t a team member pulling his weight?
- Why isn’t that task finished?

Project managers apply tools and project schedules to help track the work and answer these questions. The Gantt chart can be overwhelming on large projects as team members want to know what to work on now instead of all the tasks across the project lifetime.

An alternative solution is to use a Kanban board, also known as the Card View in LiquidPlanner, to bring clarity and focus to project delivery.

Kanban Boards
The Kanban solution has its roots in Japanese manufacturing, where instruction cards are sent through the production assembly line. Software tools have enabled the Kanban solution to work across virtual teams and promote better collaboration and productivity.

With a Kanban board, tasks start in a To Do column and move across different column statuses until the work is Done. Kanban boards are setup based on a business process or a team’s workflow. In the example above I use the following columns with my teams:

- To Do – Unstarted tasks
- In Progress – Active unfinished tasks
- Blocked – Tasks that are blocked due to an issue
- Customer Review – Tasks ready for customer review and approval
- Done – Completed tasks

As team members work on each card, they move their tasks across the different columns. By focusing on the work in manageable chunks, the team can see the status of the work in process. If tasks are blocked, the team can discuss the issues and work together to either remove the blockage or defer the task to another time. If the customer rejects the task or there is a problem with the deliverable, the card is moved back to the In Progress column for rework.

Kanban Benefits
The Kanban board offers several benefits to help improve productivity, including:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Improved communication
- Identification of project bottlenecks
- Defined focus on specific work
- Drive for completion

While a project schedule is an excellent forecasting tool and identifies who is responsible for specific tasks, the Kanban board is more effective to drive productivity because of the transparency provided to the team. If a team member’s task hasn’t moved it to the In Progress column or isn’t demonstrating progress, the entire team is aware. Teams can break down the tasks into smaller cards so progress can be visibly observed.

By glancing at the Kanban board, the team knows the status. It improves communication visually, identifies delays, and provides a subset of tasks for team to focus on and deliver. As cards move from To-Do to Done, there is a sense of accomplishment and drive to complete the set of tasks within the given time period. The transparency is also motivating as each person knows the team is depending on them for specific tasks especially when the daily review of the board occurs.

Using the Kanban Board in Your Daily Stand Up
In my Agile teams, reviewing the Kanban board at the daily stand-up was instrumental in communication and improving productivity. In prior Agile projects, I’ve been on teams where the group talks about their accomplishments, roadblocks, and upcoming tasks but they never tied the progress to the board. If you’re not implementing Agile principles, the Kanban board can still be useful by focusing on the key tasks within the next couple of weeks on the project schedule.

Each team member should be working on one and only one card on the Kanban board. Working on the highest priority card first and moving it to done allows the team to focus versus switching between multiple tasks. I’m not a fan of multitasking as the switching cost kills productivity. If the card can’t be progressed any further, it moves to the blocked column and the next item on the board can start.

Switching between Kanban and Traditional Planning
The Kanban board is one tool to help improve productivity and works well with a subset of tasks. “Sprints” work well with Kanban boards because the cards represent a subset of the overall schedule.

Using software-based Kanban boards provides better communication with other stakeholders and still lowers the project managers administrative burden.

With LiquidPlanner, the team member can click on a specific card and update the remaining effort, update subtasks, and provide collaborate in threaded discussions. Project managers can use the Kanban board to manage week-long execution and then switch to the Gantt chart view to assess the overall project progress.

Give Kanban a Try
Organizations have a never ending stream of work and teams are always looking for better ways to communicate, collaborate and deliver work better. Kanban provides the visibility to track progress and accountability. It also reinforces each person’s individual commitment to “move the ball forward” one card at a time.
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Kanban Boards

The Kanban solution has its roots in Japanese manufacturing, where instruction cards are sent through the production assembly line. Software tools have enabled the Kanban solution to work across virtual teams and promote better collaboration and productivity.

With a Kanban board, tasks start in a To Do column and move across different column statuses until the work is done. Kanban boards are setup based on a business process or a team’s workflow. In the example above I use the following columns with my teams:

- To Do – Unstarted tasks
- In Progress – Active unfinished tasks
- Blocked – Tasks that are blocked due to an issue
- Customer Review – Tasks ready for customer review and approval
- Done – Completed tasks

As team members work on each card, they move their tasks across the different columns. By focusing on the work in manageable chunks, the team can see the status of the work in process. If tasks are blocked, the team can discuss the issues and work together to either remove the blockage or defer the task to another time. If the customer rejects the task or there is a problem with the deliverable, the card is moved back to the In Progress column for rework.

Kanban Benefits

The Kanban board offers several benefits to help improve productivity, including:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Improved communication
- Identification of project bottlenecks
- Defined focus on specific work
- Drive for completion

While a project schedule is an excellent forecasting tool and identifies who is responsible for specific tasks, the Kanban board is more effective to drive productivity because of the transparency provided to the team. If a team member’s task hasn’t moved it to the In Progress column or isn’t demonstrating progress, the entire team is aware. Teams can break down the tasks into smaller cards so progress can be visibly observed.

By glancing at the Kanban board, the team knows the status. It improves communication visually, identifies delays, and provides a subset of tasks for team to focus on and deliver.

As cards move from To Do to Done, there is a sense of accomplishment and drive to complete the set of tasks within the given time period. The transparency is also motivating as each person knows the team is depending on them for specific tasks especially when the daily review of the board occurs.

Using the Kanban Board in Your Daily Stand Up

In my Agile teams, reviewing the Kanban board at the daily stand-up was instrumental in communication and improving productivity. In prior Agile projects, I’ve been on teams where the group talks about their accomplishments, roadblocks, and upcoming tasks but they never tied the progress to the board. If you’re not implementing Agile principles, the Kanban board can still be useful by focusing on the key tasks within the next couple of weeks on the project schedule.

Each team member should be working on one and only one card on the Kanban board. Working on the highest priority card first and moving it to done allows the team to focus versus switching between multiple tasks. I’m not a fan of multitasking as the switching cost kills productivity. If the card can’t be progressed any further, it moves to the blocked column and the next item on the board can start.

Switching between Kanban and Traditional Planning

The Kanban board is one tool to help improve productivity and works well with a subset of tasks. “Sprints” work well with Kanban boards because the cards represent a subset of the overall schedule.

Using software-based Kanban boards provides better communication with other stakeholders and still lowers the project managers administrative burden.

With LiquidPlanner, the team member can click on a specific card and update the remaining effort, update subtasks, and provide collaborate in threaded discussions. Project managers can use the Kanban board to manage week-long execution and then switch to the Gantt chart view to assess the overall project progress.

Give Kanban a Try

Organizations have a never ending stream of work and teams are always looking for better ways to communicate, collaborate and deliver work better. Kanban provides the visibility to team progress and accountability. It also reinforces each person’s individual commitment to “move the ball forward” one card at a time.
Growing Your Career

Chapter Four
Recruiters’ Favorite Project Management Interview Questions

BY SAMANTHA SAUER

You’ve memorized answers to the “Tell me about a time when...” questions. You’ve practiced your STAR stories. And if anyone asks about your spirit animal, you’ll be ready for that too.

And so have the other candidates. If you want to stand out from the competition, you need to prepare for the curveballs and the PM-specific questions.

We asked recruiters, hiring managers, and talent acquisition specialists for their go-to project manager interview questions. Take note of what they’re asking and what they’re looking for in a response, and you’ll be ready to ace your next interview.

What do you do when you realize a project is off deadline?

“This question will be 90 percent of my evaluation. I want candidates to walk me through, in detail, the steps they take to alert the stakeholder and make a plan to get the project back on track. Hitting deadlines is the most important issue to alert the stakeholder and make a plan to get the project back on track. Hitting deadlines is the most important issue to alert the stakeholder and make a plan to get the project back on track.”

—Cody Swann, CEO of Gunner Technology

The project team is clearly not working well together. What are three different ways to address this?

“Every project is full of the unexpected. A critical skill for project managers is the ability to solve problems flexibly and with agility. Thus, asking project managers to present multiple solutions to a challenge is a great interview question!”

—Eve MacKnight, Lead Consultant at littleowl.us

Tell me something you have never told anyone else.

“When recruiting for project managers, I’m looking for sound communication skills. Asking this fun question and hearing the candidate’s response allows me to recognize what the person in front of me is actually like. If the interviewee comes up with an interesting answer, I know they are creative and can communicate well. Their response obviously shouldn’t be negative, but needs to be something honest and interesting enough to remember.

It also allows me to see if the candidate is a quick thinker, which is another important skill required from a project manager. As this is not a particularly common question a candidate would expect to be asked, it’s fascinating to see what they come up with.”

—Steve Pritchard, HR Consultant for Cuver

What do you do when you are overwhelmed by all the moving parts in any given project?

“I love this question because it allows the candidate to show if they are aware when they are overwhelmed. You can learn if the candidate gravitates toward being tight (follow the blueprint, no matter what) or loose (wait too long to address their own confusion). Lastly, it shows whether the person knows how to ask for help, whether that’s for coaching or resources.”

—Joyce Wilson-Sanford, Executive Coach and Author

Who would you put on your personal Mount Rushmore?

“It always gets a laugh and creates a comfortable mood in the room. It’s also enlightening to hear who they choose and why they value them enough to have their heads immortalized on a mountain.”

How many stacked pennies would it take to equal the height of the Empire State Building?

“The candidates that use critical thinking as opposed to dismissing the question as silly are the ones you want to keep around. I once had a candidate jump up to the whiteboard and mathematically find his way to an answer that was within 100 feet. Needless to say, he was the type of person that we wanted on our team.”

—Sean Killian, People Operations Lead at Enola Labs Software

What’s the most critical or difficult issue you’ve had to deal with while managing a project? How did you solve it?

“I ask this question all the time because it allows me to understand what kind of problems the candidate feels are critical. What is difficult for one person might be all in a day’s work for another. It also demonstrates their thought process, creativity, and sense of urgency.”

—Kara Pooley, Head of Talent Acquisition, Blue Spurs

If the rest of the members of our PMO were in a bus accident tomorrow, what would you do? How would you handle it?

“I think this gives us insight into two key areas. First, the candidate’s ability to think on their feet. Very few candidates expect a question like this, especially junior candidates. Second, it gives us a little bit of insight into what kind of leader they are. Would they start by collecting data? Would they immediately take action? Would they delegate or try to do it all on their own? There are a million possibilities in this kind of hypothetical.”

—Jonathan D. Rogers, Operations Director and a Certified Scrum Master at AndPlus

What do you do when your project is in trouble?

“Most project managers will say they’ve never failed on a project, and they easily steer things back on course. But, in reality, a lot of projects fail based upon original estimates in budget, time, resources, market conditions, and stakeholder time/expectations.

This question allows for further investigation and probing. I like to hear how a project manager adapts and deals with tough situations; their thought process and level of humility; dealing with difficult and unreasonable stakeholders. All these are part and parcel with being a project manager.”

—Ken Kwan, Founder of Career Prophets
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Dear Elizabeth: I have an interview coming up. It’s important to me that I find a company with a culture that fits my values and the way I like to work. What questions should I be asking as a project manager to ensure that job is going to be a good fit for me? What are some of the red flags to look out for in the responses?

It’s great that you are thinking about this! So often I speak to people who are just looking at the interview process as a way of showing off their own skills. They forget that interviews are two-way conversations. You need to “interview” the company as well and find out if it is somewhere you would like to work.

After all, we spend so much time at work. It’s going to be miserable for you if you end up taking a job that doesn’t fit. After all, we spend so much time at work. It’s going to be miserable for you if you end up taking a job that doesn’t fit your working style and values. Plus, when you leave after such a short period of time after realizing your mistake, you will have some explaining to do on your CV.

But you aren’t going to have that, because you are going to find a company that is a perfect fit. You’ll be making the right choice because you know you will be happy there.

First, think about the things you want from a working environment. That could be:

- Flexible working and being able to work from home occasionally
- Knowing that the talent pipeline supports diversity and that there are strong diversity networks in place
- Not having to travel, or the opportunity to travel a lot
- A small team, or a large team, or a medium-sized team environment

Think about the way you do your work. Do you love Scrum but don’t get on so well with Kanban? Do you struggle with some tech but love other applications? Are you prepared to learn new ways of working if required, or would you rather fit into a team that uses the tools you are already familiar with?

Some Questions to Ask

Craft your questions around the things you identified above. So if you know that being able to work from home a day a week is a deal breaker for you, be open about it: “I’d like to work from home one day a week. Is that a common working pattern in your organization?” A closed question like this (where they can really only answer yes or no) is a good way to get the information you need. If they are hesitant, or if they say no, you can follow up with: “Would that be something you’d consider for me if I was successful in securing the position?”

Here are some other, more general questions you can ask to get a feel for the culture of an organization:

- What training can I expect to receive in this role?
- What support do you have for new starters? Is there a mentoring scheme?
- What kind of projects will I be working on?
- How big is my team? Is that the only team doing this kind of work?
- How long do most people stay in their roles here? Do you encourage promotion from within? What happened to the last person in this role – why is there a vacancy?
- I like to ask, “How many women are on the senior leadership team?” Adapt this list so you cover what is important to you.

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What to Look Out For

Your interviewers aren’t going to know everything about everything in the business. Asking for their thoughts on what caused the stock price to drop a few months ago could make them feel uncomfortable and as if you are testing them and trying to prove how much research you’ve done on the company. By all means ask your question, but prepare for them to hedge the response if it isn’t relevant to their role. They are only human.

However, here are some red flags to watch out for:

- Saying yes to everything and promising the earth. Unless you can see evidence of that from what you see walking around the office, you should verify claims that seem too good to be true.
- Not answering the questions or saying, “We can sort that out after you join.” No good. You shouldn’t have to join the company first to work out if you are entitled to childcare help or to understand their flexible working policy.
- Getting the feeling that they don’t support their staff, hearing that they don’t promote from within; learning that the team hasn’t been together for long because people leave their jobs quickly. While it’s always harder to walk into an established team, it’s more positive to join a team that is expanding because business is growing or because someone was promoted into a new opportunity, leaving a you-sized gap to fill.

You may only get this one chance to ask your questions, so make it count! You won’t lose anything by asking everything that matters to you. On the contrary, you can only gain by having more information with which to make your ultimate decision.
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You may only get this one chance to ask your questions, so make it count! You won’t lose anything by asking everything that matters to you. On the contrary, you can only gain by having more information with which to make your ultimate decision. Even if they offer you the job, if you have uncovered insights that would make you think twice about saying yes, you are still a winner because you managed to dodge taking a job that would ultimately make you unhappy.
The Secrets to Getting Promoted as a Project Manager

BY CESAR ABEID

The first questions I ask project managers who listen to my podcast and connect with me by email is this: When it comes to your career in project management, what are your desires, pains and needs? After communicating with hundreds of project management professionals, the answers often seem to gravitate around this one common topic: getting promoted. So how do you get promoted as a project manager? Here are my four tips.

1. Treat your promotion as a project.
PMs tend to look at everything as a project. Why not use your four tips.

2. Learn from the past.
PMs tend to look at everything as a project. Why not use some of your skills and treat your promotion as a project? The following ideas will help you get started.

• Remember that projects have a beginning, a middle and an end. So does the promotion process. Think about your promotion not as an open-ended, vague journey, but instead make it specific and time-bound.

• Be clear about the results you want. What is the promotion you are looking for? Are you a project coordinator looking for your first opportunity as a PM? Or are you a PM looking for larger projects? Perhaps you’re a PM who seeks a promotion to program manager. In any case, picture yourself in your new position and make it specific as possible.

• Do your homework. What is the natural promotion for you at this point? Look at your current company and learn about its internal career paths. Look at others who were recently promoted and examine their journey.

• Break it down. Once you know and have a clear picture of where you want to move, break that transition into some milestones. You can start by answering questions like these:
  » Would it be important to have a recommendation by your current co-workers on LinkedIn?
  » If your dream promotion is to be part of another department, do you have a relationship with anyone there?
  » Do you know who your future boss would be, and do you have a relationship with him or her?

3. Think with the mind of the company.
Your level of seniority and the amount of time you put into your work only goes so far. More importantly, companies reward you for the value that you bring them, and how much it would hurt if you left. When looking to make a case for your promotion, your company needs to see you not as an employee that is on opposite sides of a negotiation.

Instead, think with the mind of the company. What is the company’s mission statement? What is the company’s strategy and what are its goals for this year? Does the company value teamwork in the workplace? What are the company’s greatest challenges at the moment? Think about these issues and goals and then embody them as your own. This will make you a true team member, and someone that is on the same side as the company. Then, when you ask for a salary increase or a promotion, the company will see that as an investment in itself.

4. Invest in yourself.
Finally, as a PM, you need to always invest in yourself. Many companies offer training for employees. If your company doesn’t, I recommend you take the initiative and create a plan for your own training. There are a number of webinars, video tutorials and online courses; project management conferences, university extension programs, books, PMI’s resources—the opportunities for learning are almost endless. Find something that works for your schedule and your learning style. And ask around, see what team members and network connections have had success with. Project management is a field that’s always growing and it’s important to keep up to stay relevant.

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1. Remember that projects have a beginning, a middle and an end. So does the promotion process. Think about your promotion not as an open-ended, vague journey, but instead make it specific and time-bound.
2. Be clear about the results you want. What is the dream position and make it as specific as possible. Would you be promoting to part of another department, do you have a relationship with anyone there?
3. Do you know who your future boss would be, and do you have a relationship with him or her?

2. Learn from the past.

This is perhaps the most important exercise when looking for a promotion. Reflect back on your last promotion, and analyze what the process and experience was like. Did you and your boss talk through some detailed negotiations or did they promote you unexpectedly after a special project?

Then, look around at your colleagues and ask the same question: How did they get promoted?

See if there are any commonalities with your own previous promotion. (And if you’re haven’t yet received a promotion at your current organization, see what you can learn from your team members.)

Finally, look at your boss and the team managers around you. How did they get their current positions? Once you start analyzing how people get promoted within your company, you’ll see some common factors. It could be something as simple as having a good relationship with your manager, or knowing about positions before they’re widely advertised.

Perhaps the common thread is that teammates got promoted because they met their performance goals or had a good relationship with a particular individual of influence within the company—or a bit of both.

Whatever you see as a pattern, think about how you can leverage it.

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Finally, as a PM, you need to always invest in yourself. Many companies offer training for employees. If your company doesn’t, I recommend you take the initiative and create a plan for your own training.

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3. Think with the mind of the company.

Your level of seniority and the amount of time you put into your work only goes so far. More importantly, companies reward you for the value that you bring them, and how much it would hurt if you left.

When looking to make a case for your promotion, your company needs to see you not as an employee that is on opposite sides of a negotiation.

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“Managing up” is the notion that employees nurture the relationship with their bosses in order to get the best result for themselves, and the organization.

However, managing up is tricky business. Too much attention to managing up may compete with the job at hand—getting a specific project executed in time and on budget. Project managers also have to “manage down,” and orchestrate the efforts of others to reach organizational goals.

“You want to be described as indispensable,” says Rosanne Badowski, co-author of “Managing Up: How to Forge an Effective Relationship With Those Above You” and a former executive assistant to Jack Welch at General Electric. “Doing what you can to make your manager’s job easier will not only help them do their job, but you will be considered a valuable asset to your manager and to your organization.”

So how do PMs work well with their bosses? Here are six principles to managing up, and make yourself a valuable contributor:

Know your boss’s work style.

Do they like detailed reports or broad overviews? Do they want information delivered face-to-face, by email or in a word document? Are they analytical, preferring facts and data, or do they like their facts rolled into the context of a story? Pay attention to the preference, and then adjust your style accordingly. When I was filing stories by email in the mid-1990s, over those 2800-baud modems, there was no guarantee that my entire document would make it. So I called my editor after each email to see if the manuscript arrived. My busy editor made it clear that she did not appreciate those follow-up calls, so I stopped.

Communicate like your boss.

If your boss likes daily emails, send them. If your boss wants a once-a-week summary, then do that. If you convey information in the manner a manager prefers, they’re more likely to retain it. Looking for clues? “A good way to figure out what your boss wants is to watch how she communicates with you. She’s probably doing it the way she likes best,” says Penelope Trunk in her blog post, “7 Ways to Manage Up.”

Know what matters to your boss.

Understand how your boss is dealing with his higher-ups so you can avoid inadvertently complicating their work flow. If they tell you that they’re buried under a pile of performance reviews, give them the space they need to work, or ask how you can help—rather than interrupting with a series of questions, or more requests.

Don’t surprise your boss.

Keep your boss informed on the projects you manage. If your boss is the type that doesn’t want to get into details, find a way to share only enough for them to be able to resolve the problem.

Learn how to say no to your boss.

Say yes to the things that matter the most to your boss, and no to everything else. If your boss asks you to do something that you don’t have time for, talk about priorities. Clarify that you want to make sure you finish what is most important, and this will probably result in some no’s to the lesser projects.

Talk about solutions, not problems.

Be proactive by looking for issues as they develop and then head them off with solutions. Your boss will appreciate you for all the “problems” that never reach their desk.
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BY TIM CLARK

Six Ways to Manage Up and Make Yourself Indispensable
EBOOK: PROJECT MANAGER CAREER GUIDE

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Cesar Abeid is a Project Management Professional®, author, professional speaker, business coach and consultant, and entrepreneur. As the host of the Project Management for the Masses Podcast and the Construction Industry Podcast, Cesar reaches audiences of thousands around the world every week. Cesar is also a Happiness Engineer at Automattic, makers of WordPress.com

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- Take on more by understanding what’s working and what’s not across all projects and teams.

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