HOW TO BE AN AGILE PROJECT MANAGER

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WHAT MAKES A GREAT PROJECT MANAGER?

"The only way to do great work is to love what you do."

--Steve Jobs

Before we enter into a detailed discussion of Agile project management, let us first touch on the basics of project management overall. To become a good Agile Project manager, one must first learn and perfect the art of project management as a whole.

Project Management is an underappreciated skill. That might seem like an overstatement, but in many organizations, the understanding of what a Project Manager does, and what their responsibilities are differs greatly.

In many ways project management is underappreciated because it is not fully understood. Too often individuals end up in project management that simply are not suited for that job.

Some people believe that project managers should simply be note- takers, administrators or meeting planners. But that should not be the only role of a project manager. It requires a certain skilled and complex combination of soft skills to become a successful project manager.

In our opinion, this should not necessarily just be the next step for a business analyst or technical person just because it has the appearance of management.

In the same way that a star technical performer might not be suitable for a management role, in the same way, not all people are ideal for a project management role. This is something that is starting to be realized more and more.

So, with that being said, what are the key components or attributes of a successful Project Manager?

Let us now look at just a few of the multiple roles that the project manager must play during the duration of a project.

At various times, a Project Manager must be:

- Coach
- Administrative Assistant

- Planner
- Accountant
- Psychologist
- Public Speaker

So how does each specific roles/skills apply to the job of Project Manager?

Well, let's discuss this and site specific examples of each.

Coach

A good Project Manager needs to manage and motivate a team and apply strategy how to succeed with the resources that he has.

For those of you non-sports types this might not seem relevant, but having served as a baseball and soccer coach I can tell you the comparisons are appropriate. In both situations, groups must work together towards a single goal.

A coach must motivate. A coach must organize. A coach must lead. All of these are responsibilities of the project manager.

And In both situations, on any team there are **star** performers, **average** performers, and **poor** performers. And finally, in both situations, some of the average and poor performers can typically improve with more coaching and peer support.

Unfortunately, a few team members will never become good contributors and should be cut from the team. As it happens with sports, it happens in the professional world as well.

There are also the normal human issues that make us all so very different. A good Project Manager must be able to understand these differences and realize the need to change their tactics to suit the individuals they are working with, whether this is the project team, customer or other stakeholders.

Administrator:

This point could be debated, but many times a Project Manager's job is like that of an Administrative assistant. An undeniable part of a Project Manager's job is maintaining documentation, and acting in a deferential role to management, coordinating and planning meetings, working around other people's schedules.

Clearly, organizational skills are of paramount importance. If a Project Manager is not organized and does not stay one step ahead of the project team then a bad impression could be created.

In some organizations, this is the extent of their need for the project manager role. For this, I would note that the proper title for this role is not Project Manager, but Project *Coordinator*.

If all an organization requires is basic document management, meeting scheduling, and administrative work, change the title of this role accordingly to that of Project Coordinator. In fact, it is not necessarily a bad idea to have a few project coordinators on the team, but these would be more junior level roles. This could be something that a recent college graduate or a college intern could do on their way to a full career as a project manager.

Planner:

Another undeniable part of a Project Manager's life is the need to be a forward-looking planner. A good Project Manager is proactive, rather than reactive, but also has that innate ability to see into the future with some accuracy.

This means planning for contingencies, anticipating risks, and coordinating competing priorities and managing personal schedule conflicts.

Accountant/Financial Analyst:

Managing a budget can be a significant portion of a Project Manager's time. At my busiest point, I was managing budgets easily in the combined total of over 5 million.

Determining which costs are considered to be capital and which are expense, which period it should be charged in, etc are not typical skills held by most IT people. This accounting element is another challenge that Project Managers must deal with.

Psychologist:

Somewhat similar to being a coach, but part of a Project Manager's job is managing the individual personalities on their teams. This includes maintaining an individual relationship as well as managing interpersonal conflicts that may arise between various team members.

We will stress many times in the book about the importance of team, but it is also important that a Project Manager understand each individual on the team and understand that each person will respond differently and thus should be treated for their specific needs and valued for their specific skills.

Public Speaker:

And finally, the role that makes many of us uncomfortable.

Project Managers must be able to lead a room, whether in person or via telephone and command and lead the agenda.

For those with more passive, timid personalities this can be a difficult challenge.

Project Managers must be able to present ideas clearly in a multitude of situations such as Project Status Meetings, Project Kick-Off Meetings etc.

The ability to clearly and persuasively communicate to various types of audiences is a crucial Project Management skill.

Now, certain abilities are more important than others as are certain personality traits. Just like any other job, or any other role, there are certain personality and professional traits that make for a successful project manager.

Skills and Traits of a Successful Project Manager:

Project Managers need to have a combination of skills that enable them to take care of all steps required to get the job done.

Technical Skills

We touched upon this earlier but it is paramount that a project manager has the ability to understand what is being completed at a technical level.

For this reason, we believe that former developers and business analysts make good Project Managers because they come into the job with those technical skills already in place.

Business Knowledge

This is similar to technical skills, but even more important when discussing the project with the stakeholders. There is no realistic way that a Project Manager can discuss the projects and truly understand the business impact and needs without comprehending the business.

A project manager that I worked with had taken a job with an Energy company with no real knowledge of the underlying industry.

For the first six months of the project, it was a complete struggle because he did not understand the needs of the refineries, nor did he grasp the needs of the traders which he supported.

Sure, he was able to manage schedules, communication and all of the other generic project management skills, but without this basic knowledge of the business, he was out of his element

The Four Key Category Skills:

From our experience the successful Project Managers all have similar traits. Not in their personality, not in their looks, no they share the ability to do four things well.

A project manager should have the ability to do the following, and do the following WELL:

- Communicate
- Delegate
- Motivate
- Appreciate

Communicate:

We will stress this so much that our readers will get frustrated, but communication is the number one project management skill.

Communication is everywhere in the Project Manager's world. Think of all of the communication involved with the role of project manager: communication with the team, communication with IT management, and communication with the stakeholders.

Communication will **make or break a project**. Bad communication will almost certainly doom a project.

This is so important that we dedicate an entire chapter to this key point later in the book, our chapter Communication Management 2020.

One of the issues that I have seen over and over again are otherwise talented people who are in the role of Project Manager who are poor communicators.

Read it here first: *this simply does not work*.

I do believe people can improve their communication. I am not suggesting that one must be as persuasive as a salesperson or as an attorney, but it is paramount that as a Project Manager, that you are heard, understood and respected as well.

Delegate:

Project Managers must have the ability to delegate tasks and communicate these responsibilities clearly to their team. A project manager needs to be careful not to over delegate and take care of a certain amount of tasks on their own.

When a task is delegated or assigned, the expectations must be clearly stated, ideally both verbally and also in some tangible method such as an email or another item that provides a paper trail.

Motivate:

At a certain point, a Project Manager needs to be able to take charge and not be a "nice guy". It is your responsibility to motivate the individuals on your team, even if you are in a matrix environment in which these people do not report to you.

A project manager needs to be able to command respect and get the team to work for them. Try to lead by example, show a real interest in what these people do, and try to be someone that people want to do well for.

One of the most delicate balancing acts that a Project Manager must face is the balance of earning the respect of the team while also being liked by them. In this case, it is FAR more important to be respected than be liked. Sometimes the well-liked nice guys are the ones team members feel they can take advantage of.

Appreciate:

If the team performs above and beyond expectations be sure to recognize their efforts.

This is when the coaching facet is involved, we need to be sure to be just as supportive and appreciative as we are demanding and professional.

People want to work hard for people they like and respect, there is no need to be an autocratic jerk. Strive to be the person that you would want to work for yourself.

In my experience, the most successful managers and project managers are those you respect first and like second.

Don't think for a minute that a team will work hard for you if they hate you, sure they may work for you, but they will hold something back.

Be the "Bad Guy":

Another way that we as Project Managers can show appreciation is by demonstrating that we have the backs of our team members.

One of the most difficult facets of Project Management is that many times you have to be the one delivering the bad news. A project manager should not point out an under-performing team member and site them as the reason that a date was missed.

This falls on the Project Manager, as unfair as it may be. Also, a Project Manager has the responsibility of resisting a user request if it falls outside of the project parameters.

We recommend having some built-in flexibility in the timeline just for such an occurrence. But, for example, if a key stakeholder requests a large new feature one week before the go-live date, it is the **Project Manager's job** to inform this stakeholder that it cannot be done in the time allotted.

Another example from a former client, I worked with a project manager who had a deadline less than two weeks away. A revised requirement came in and she did not want to approve it because it was so close to the deadline.

Unknown to her, her boss had already promised this feature to the client without her knowledge and had overruled her on pushing back to the client.

When the deadline was subsequently missed because there was not really adequate time to complete, it was the Project Manager and not the boss that approved the change that got in trouble.

Yeah, didn't really seem fair to me either.

In our vision of Project Management, a Project Manager is very important, but several people will need to change their view of what a Project Manager's responsibilities are.

We envision Project Managers who are technically savvy, adaptable, and willing to work as a partner with others on the team to make projects successful.

We see Project Managers who are equally comfortable with Waterfall as they are with Agile. The knowledge of both is very important to be adaptable enough to apply different methodologies to different projects.

And finally, we envision Project Managers who focus on their communication and will make this their number one priority. By combining different communication methods, the Project Manager should engage stakeholders early; apply their observations and analysis to determine the specific communication needs for each stakeholder.

In our vision, the Project Manager role is not going away, but it is evolving. Like anything else, for those individuals willing to adapt, they will likely be successful.

On the other hand, those unwilling to adapt might need to consider other career alternatives or take a different path.

We strongly feel that the Project Manager role needs to evolve, partly out of necessity. Several Agile and Scrum environments either remove or diminish the role of the Project Management role. The skills of the project manager can easily be adapted to work with a Waterfall, Agile, or our recommendation the Agile 2020 hybrid PMO environment.

Read more about Agile Project Management in our book, The Agile Project Manager 2020:

[AGILE PROJECT MANAGER 2020 FULL BOOK](#)

This and the following section on Communication are but a few of the topics covered in our book, The Agile Project Manager 2020:

Other topics include:

- Changing perceptions of the project management role
- Understanding the basics of Waterfall project management

- Evaluating the Project pipeline
- Agile software development
- Running the perfect meeting
- The future of outsourcing

[AGILE PROJECT MANAGER 2020 FULL BOOK](#)

PRIMARY PROJECT MANAGER SKILL: COMMUNICATION

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

-George Bernard Shaw

Just one person's opinion, but in all of the discussion of methodologies, teams, and analytics it comes down to this statement:

Communication is the one skill without which a project manager cannot succeed.

How many times have we as Project Managers been in this position? What was clearly understood by some is not understood by the person that matters most, and big issues result from this.

In our opinion, the most important responsibility of a Project Manager is communication.

In a recent survey of our clients, a clear pattern began to emerge citing the difference in successful and unsuccessful projects.

For the successful projects, the Project Managers all created an environment that fostered good two-way communication. I want to stress one key point here: the most important thing is not to just provide updates and talk, but make sure that you as a Project Manager are available to listen.

Several of my Project Manager colleagues are excellent talkers. They command a room and have that type of voice that a radio DJ would envy. They sound like a defense attorney that only a millionaire could afford to have on retainer.

But they can't ***listen*** to save their lives. They are so "on" all of the time, working the charm, etc, that listening to the input of others becomes difficult for them.

Be sure to provide information but also to do a good job of *eliciting* good information. In other words, be not just a good, but a great listener. This simple fact can make or break your project.

So, in our survey of over 50 clients the emerging four traits for successful projects involved the Project Managers:

- Maintain a clear communication schedule
- Communicate clearly to where it is understood
- Talk to stakeholders early and keep them engaged
- Create a communication channel by which stakeholders can reach the PM individually rather than have to speak in front of others in a meeting

On the flip side of these positive traits, the negative patterns that emerged included the following:

Failing projects had these traits:

- Full evaluation of the project communication needs
- Understanding how the information was received
- Two-way communication (poor listening)

As a Project Manager, I definitely have made these mistakes in the past and learned from them. What is very difficult for any individual is to understand how communication is received.

How are we supposed to be inside someone else's head to understand what they heard? This is impossible, which makes the repetitive nature of project communication so necessary. I have a personality trait that I am sure annoys many people, in that I repeat myself many times.

Not like a parrot or anything where I say it twice in a row, but I will say something once, and then close out the point by summarizing the key point. Sometimes people will poke fun at this habit (rightly so), but one thing that does happen is that *the point gets made*.

Another positive habit I have learned helps to address the issue of understanding how information was received was to follow up any status updates with a simple Q&A session(for meetings) and then follow up with people individually to ask them if they have any questions about the update that I provided.

Many times people are too shy or are embarrassed to ask clarifying questions, or as I call them, "questions of confirmation" in which the person believes that they know the answer but they still want some reassurance. As the Project Manager, be there to reassure them, that is a great part of the responsibility of the project manager.

Many of my friends have been stunned that their projects that were running really well, under budget and ahead of schedule were perceived as failures by the business. The reason for this turned out to be one or two displeased stakeholders that had been confused by the project progress, made some false assumptions and then spread negative gossip about the project all over.

Communication is the one skill without which a project manager cannot succeed. (see I repeated that too)

Now this is not exactly a new revelation, yet still you would be surprised how often communication is overlooked as a key project management component.

Here are our guidelines for managing Project Management communication

THREE RULES FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION
1. FULL TRANSPARENCY – KEEP NO SECRETS
2. IDENTIFY AND SELECT THE PROPER COMMUNICATION METHOD
3. CENTRALIZED PROJECT STATUS

Types of Communication:

The primary types of communication are as follows:

- Documentation
- In-person
- Phone
- Email
- Instant Message/Chat

Taking it a step further we would like to differentiate between active and passive communication types and point out when it may be appropriate to use one over the other.

Passive communication might be fine in the middle of the project for redundant updates such as weekly status reports. For working with a project team, and especially building and developing a relationship with the project team, it is important to use more active communication methods.

One of the absolute most important things that can be done is to identify the correct communication method for the specific projects, specific stakeholders and the current state of the project.

In this table, we identify the primary communication methods, evaluate if the method is passive or active, and rank it in order of our preference.

Communication Methods and Recommendations:

Communication	Passive/Active	Preference
In-Person	Active	1
Phone	Active	2
I.M/Chat	Active	3
E-Mail	Passive	4
Documentation	Passive	5

To us, there is nothing better for fostering a good project relationship than good in-person communication. This could be nothing more than a 5-minute chat or maybe it extends into an hour impromptu discussion with the project sponsor. The benefits of in-person communications are somewhat obvious, but for a project manager especially it clearly conveys your involvement and level of commitment to the others on the team.

Another good form of active communication is a simple phone call. When a quick update should be provided or a question asked, I don't recommend leaving this to an email. An Email to me is something that may or may not be read and responded to. We all receive so many unwanted emails that why add another to the inbox.

If a significant update is to be provided, or a question asked especially of the project sponsor or product owner, try the in-person first and if that can't happen try the phone call or instant message.

Instant Messaging/Chat is a good mechanism also, but again should only be used after the phone call is attempted, because like emails, people tend to work with numerous chat windows open simultaneously, and may not see the message or feel like responding to it.

And finally the passive communication types of Email and documentation. Emails, as noted earlier, are primarily good for generic updates and to confirm items discussed through other means. One **great** use of email is that of a paper trail.

As I started in my Project Management career, I far preferred the in-person communication mechanism. I would speak with my team, talk to the business and in my mind everything was fine and understandings were in place.

I would **not** follow up with an email to summarize what we had discussed, and in absence of proof to the contrary, those verbal agreements could be denied.

One of my colleagues showed me how he would always immediately return from any kind of meeting or in-person discussion and send a follow up email to summarize what was agreed upon, thereby creating a paper trail if needed later.

It seems like an unnecessary second step, but in the unlikely situation in which someone claims to not to have agreed to something that they did, in fact, commit to, this can save your proverbial, professional backside.

I knew a colleague who would record meetings as a CYA mechanism, but that is not really professional. We strongly believe that an email follow up is sufficient.

The email would be a simple format such as this:

Ms. Thompson,

Thanks for spending the time to discuss the project plan today. To summarize what we discussed, you are okay with the following changes:

--Move UAT back two weeks

--Add Lisa to the QA team

--Add four more items to the product backlog, which will add one more sprint to the overall project

--Request to please provide Donuts for the project team every Friday from now on

Thanks,

David B. Twilley

**Just as a footnote, that donut thing actually worked. Homer Simpson would be proud.

Communication Frequency:

This is the area in which a Project Manager needs to do a better job of reading people. As the project proceeds, we need to be able to identify and anticipate what the communication needs are that goes *beyond* the Communication Plan.

The Communication Plan is simply a guideline, because at the beginning of the project things are fine, and nobody expects that they will need daily updates or hand-holding. At the end of the project, however, it happens all the damn time.

As I work with a Project Sponsor, I do a couple of things:

- I observe how engaged they are with the project
- I ask other Project Managers how they have worked with them in the past
- I watch them for participation in status meetings.
- I notice if they respond to the status emails.

So, will all of this, what should happen next?

What you want to do is to increase the amount of communication to the point at which the project sponsor is satisfied. One piece of advice that we share is that communication should increase incrementally as the project moves forward.

What we are saying is that the more progress that you make, the more this needs to be communicated accordingly.

One of the worst things that can happen to a project is ironically when the project is proceeding well, but an anxious project sponsor is under the false impression that it is NOT. Unfortunately, once this impression is created, it takes triple the effort to correct this false impression, *if that impression can be changed at all!*

To prevent this, we make sure to broadcast key accomplishments early and often. We visit project sponsors at their desk just to give them informal updates, and also allow for them to ask any questions. Sometimes we even get to the point that they ask us not to bother them.

You know what, that is OK. Problems do not occur when the Project Manager is **too engaged,** no problems occur when the Project Manager makes assumptions that the business and the team are on the same page.

Here is our recommendation with increasing communication and identifying ideal times for it to occur.

Project Role	Status Meeting	In-Person Visit
Project Sponsor	Monday	Friday
Key Stakeholder	Monday	Wednesday
Key Stakeholder	Monday	Thursday

Our objective here is to manage the impression of the project. The impression of the project in the minds of these three business users is that we are involved, caring, and making great progress.

As noted in the quote to start the chapter, "the single biggest problem about communication, is the illusion that it is taking place". We cannot assume that each of these individuals speak to one another or read all of the status emails. We must take control of the communication and **own** the process.

Types of Communication – Summarized:

So by now we know all of the communication methods, have discussed differences between active and passive communication types, and have discussed the frequency of communication also.

One other recommendation that we have, which we have used to great success is posting a centralized project summary in a network location:

This document is to be updated daily with as much detail as deemed necessary with the objective being that it serves as an executive summary of sorts.

Where this really helps is when a business project team member moves off the project and is replaced. Now, with this document they can immediately see exactly what is going on and get a snapshot view of the project progress.

This differs with status reports, especially since this new project team member would not have access to all of the cumulative status reports over the duration of the project.

I will not give you a sample document here because that is for each client to define

For Status reports, make sure that this is communicated to cover the key points

- The Work Tasks – How it is to be done
- The Objectives – why it is being done
- Timeline – when it is being done
- Cost – how much did we budget, where are we as a percentage
- Stakeholders – who is involved and what are they doing

We are big fans of simplicity and feel that for certain audiences, the most basic type of status report works the best.

If you are familiar with the concept of the One-Page Project Manager, then following a similar type of approach might work well, especially when dealing with upper-level C-Level managers.
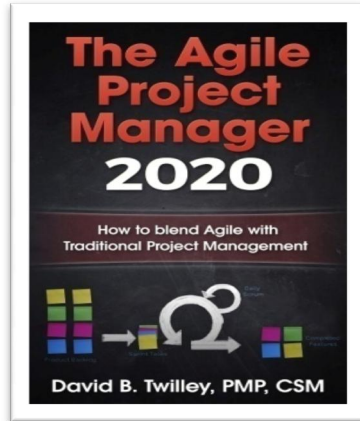
As we said before, and will repeat over and over: ***Communication is the one skill without which a project manager cannot succeed***.

This was merely an introduction to the basics of project management, for a more in-depth discussion of project management, look for our other titles such as The Agile Project Manager 2020.

Thank you,

David B. Twilley

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR:

The Agile Project Manager 2020 includes the above discussions as well as a full examination of how Waterfall and Agile projects can work together in an integrated and sophisticated PMO (Project Management Office)

Other topics include:

- Changing perceptions of the project management role
- Understanding the basics of Waterfall project management
- Evaluating the Project pipeline
- Agile software development
- Running the perfect meeting
- The future of outsourcing

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