

# What practitioners consider to be the skills and behaviours of an effective people project manager



Eddie Fisher, International Journal of Project Management 29.8 (2011) p.994–1002

## KEYWORDS

- People skills and behaviours
- Leadership
- Managing people

## Article Highlight:

Project managers need to show open and honest concern for and genuine interests in the people they work with, understanding their feelings and emotions. This understanding will help them to predict future behaviours of their team members so they can plan to avoid, for example, people conflicts.

Showing respect for others and what they stand for is a behaviour that carries a lot of weight in effective people management – in any culture. People value being respected for what they are and stand for. It makes them feel good about themselves but also about the person showing the respect.

## What does the paper cover?

The paper covers what project management practitioners consider to be the skills and behaviours of an effective people project manager. Using a combination of literature review, face-to-face interviews and focus group meetings, the author identifies the six specific skills and associated behaviours as being the most important for an effective project manager, and ones that would improve the successful delivery of projects.

## Methodology:

The initial review of the general and project management literature studied theorists and authors such as McGregor (1967), Blake and Mouton (1964), Honey (1988), Kets de Vries (2001), Kliem and Ludin (1992), Kadefors (2004), Rosenau (1998) and Huemann (2010). The author then moved on to conducting two focus groups, in which 10 members of the community of practice were interviewed individually and together to share their practical knowledge and experience. Five male and five female project managers were interviewed to manage any gender bias. They worked in the telecommunications, banking, consultancy and engineering industries, and their ages ranged from 28 to 47 years.

## Research findings:

After the triangulation of the research data from the literature review and the face-to-face meetings, there were eight people skills identified as ones that make an effective people project manager:

### 1. Managing emotions

Showing an honest understanding for the needs of other people and an understanding of the motives of others and acting accordingly

### 2. Building trust

Accepting people for what they are, empowering them and asking them to take on board more responsibilities.

### 3. Effective communication

Holding off-line communications with others to develop effective relationships.

### 4. Motivating others

Telling people they are talented and skilled.

### 5. Influencing others

Selling others the benefit for doing something or doing something different.

### 6. Cultural awareness

Developing, displaying and applying an awareness of the cultural differences of team members.

### 7. Leading others

Leading by example through behaviour and by displaying appropriate levels of competence and self-confidence.

### 8. Team building

Showing an open appreciation for the contributions of team members and rewarding them openly for good work.

## Conclusions:

The author concluded that people management is one area in which project managers need to make big improvements. Skills on their own, including their applications, do not make an effective people project manager, and specific behaviours for each skill need to be applied by project managers to make these skills truly effective.

There are six specific managing people skills and associated behaviours that make an effective people project manager:

### 1. Understanding behavioural characteristics

Show an open and authentic concern for others based on true feelings and not invented ones, and show that you believe in your team members' abilities.

### 2. Leading others

Show a high level of motivation towards innovation to inspire others to become more creative and innovative.

### 3. Influencing others

Influence others by selling them the benefit. For example, why they should change so they can see the benefit and make the appropriate changes to their behaviours or attitude.

### 4. Authentizotic behaviour

Being authentic or genuine, not play-acting and understanding what is important to the other person (what makes them tick).

### 5. Conflict management

Establish the root causes of the conflict by talking to others openly and honestly, and show loyalty, integrity, trust, help and support when dealing with conflicts. Concentrate on the work issues and do not get personal.

### 6. Cultural awareness

Develop, display and apply an awareness of the cultural differences of team members, and show an open optimism about cultural differences and views that confirm that you see cultural diversity as an enhancement to your own values and beliefs. Adopt cultural awareness behaviours to manage people in their projects effectively.

Project managers need to apply these skills and behaviours, observe the outcomes and likely changes the application has on people, then consider whether to modify them to make them work even better. This is a continuous process that the focus group recognised as being as important as the competences themselves.

## Significance of the research:

The importance project management plays in today and tomorrow's changing working environments and working practices has increased dramatically since the 1990s, and more companies than ever before have adopted project management methodologies and processes. As more organisations adopt project management as a modus operandi to deliver work packages, and the demand for project managers grows, there is an increasing interest in people skills of project managers and in standards for development and assessment of project management competence.

## Comments from author:

The subject of how to manage people in project environments more effectively is as topical today as it was when this article was first published in 2011. According to recent research conducted by the Gallup Business Journal (2015/6), only 2.5 per cent of companies complete their projects successfully. Insufficient team skills, poor communications and virtual team issues are considered to be the top-ranking areas for major improvements within project environments, according to Proof Hub (accessed on 9 July 2018, [www.proofhub.com](http://www.proofhub.com)).

The community of project management practice and academia have both benefited from extensive research in how to manage people in projects effectively, but new research appears to have focused more on the 'What' rather than the 'How'. This potentially explains why so many projects still fail, with the major reason given as people issues. Future research needs to focus more on providing project managers with practical suggestions on how to manage people better in their projects (the 'How').

There are two additional contemporary managing people skills for project managers driven by today's continuous demand for being more creative:

1. Lead to innovate by active listening, doing not talking, and applying common sense.
2. Create a no-blame culture and an environment where mistakes are considered to be learning experiences and constructive criticism is openly encouraged and fostered.

## Complete article

The original version of this article was published in the International Journal of Project Management, Vol number 29.8, E. Fisher (2011), p994–1002. It can be accessed via: [sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0263786310001316](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0263786310001316)

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## Glossary:

### Authentizotic behaviours:

Being authentic or genuine, not play-acting and understanding what is important to the other person (what makes them tick).

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