

by Bruce Nicholls



## ::“Soft” Skills for Project Managers

**S**oft skills: A set of skills that influence how we interact with each other. It includes such abilities as effective communication, creativity, analytical thinking, diplomacy, flexibility, change-readiness and problem solving, leadership, team building and listening skills. The goal of soft skill training is to give students the opportunity to learn and practice new patterns of behavior and in so doing, to enhance human relations.

U.S. Air Force - National Security Personnel System

The use of the word “soft” is deceptive. These skills are usually acquired through experience and practice. “Hard” skills are easier to learn and follow, but the greatest payback for a project manager will be in learning and putting into practice the soft skills. A project manager needs to gain the trust of the people influenced by the project, and this trust is achieved through the use of soft skills.

Gartner published a research document in 1999 titled *What Skills Will Characterize Top Project Managers?* The document concluded it was not enough for a project manager to have a good project management methodology and technical expertise. In order to improve project outcomes, the project manager had to have knowledge related to the business and enterprise culture together with leadership and interpersonal skills.

### Project Managers Increase Success

The skills needed by a successful software project manager have been studied by the Standish Group and documented in their annual CHAOS reports. In the 2001 report, the question was asked: “Does a project manager increase success?” The report concluded that a project manager did increase the chance of success, but there were more skills required than just project management skills. Three of the skills highlighted were good business, organization and communication skills. Business skills were the most important asset a project manager can

possess. Good communication was found to be the cornerstone of successful projects, and organizational skills were needed to provide a working structure that could support the various functions of the project.

The conclusion from these reports was that to be a successful project manager you need to:

Have experience and use a project management methodology effectively

Know your business and its objectives

Have good communication and interpersonal skills

These skills are highlighted in the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) Third Edition* in Section 1.5, Areas of Expertise. This section details the need of the project manager and team to have knowledge and skills outside of the specialized tools and techniques used in managing projects. To be an effective team and project manager, you must use and understand the knowledge and skills from at least five areas of expertise:

Project management body of knowledge

Application area knowledge, standards and regulations

Project environment understanding

General management knowledge and skills

Interpersonal skills

The guide specifically mentions soft skills relating to team development: “Interpersonal Skills (Section 1.5.5), sometimes known as ‘soft skills,’ are particularly important to team development. By understanding the sentiments of project team members, anticipating their actions, acknowledging their concerns and following up on their issues, the project management team can greatly reduce problems and increase

cooperation. Skills such as empathy, influence, creativity and group facilitation are valuable assets when managing the project team.”

Throughout the guide, it is assumed that these skills, tools and techniques are used, in PMBOK terminology, “to perform the project.”

A project is rarely performed by a lone project manager. Other members of the organization are usually co-opted/assigned to work on the project. These members must then be managed and built into a team to get maximum benefit. If the project manager has a choice of members, the techniques below can be used as the basis for selection.

### Enhancing Team-Building Soft Skills

The project manager must first get to know the team members as individuals. This includes assessing team members for their preferred thinking and personality style.

The formalized HR approach for this is determining their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator usually referred to as MBTI. The purpose of the MBTI personality inventory is to describe and make understandable/useful Jung’s theory of personality types. The MBTI questionnaire must be given by a qualified administrator after which one of 16 major personality types is assigned to the examinee.

The 16 major personality types are made out of four separate dichotomies. It is assumed an individual has a preference toward one of each pair of opposites. The four dichotomies are:

Extraversion vs. Introversion

Sensing vs. Intuition

Thinking vs. Feeling

Judging vs. Perceiving

As an example, someone who is classed as an INTP (Introvert, Intuition, Thinking and Perception) is seen as an independent problem solver. They excel at analyzing ideas and situations. They work best alone and can be seen as quiet and reserved. They find it difficult to work on routine tasks, preferring to focus on complex problems. They prize precision in communication and dislike redundancy or stating the obvious. If they are not appreciated they can become cynical and negative critics.

“*The major problems of our work are not so much technological as sociological in nature.*”

Peopleware — Productive Projects and Teams  
by Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister

A questionnaire that gives similar results to the MBTI is known as the Keirsey Temperament Sorter. This is freely available in a book titled *Please Understand Me* by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates. The questionnaire consists of 70 questions with two possible answers and can be completed in less than half an hour. The answers are then analyzed for patterns that match the 16 major personality types.

Another questionnaire that can be given is the Management Team Roles Indicator or MTR-i. This is based on an Internet study of over 20,000

people and maps the 16 MBTI personality types into eight carefully-defined team roles. Simplified views of these roles are:

Sculptors — Get things done now

Curators — Clarify ideas and understanding

Explorers — Look for new ways

Innovators — Create new ideas and perspectives

Conductors — Organize

Scientists — Explain how and why

Coaches — Harmonize people

Crusaders — Evangelize

These psychological techniques give the project manager a framework that can be useful in finding out how best to interact and manage the team.

To be able to motivate and understand team members, the project manager needs to know the personal goals of the individual. A team member could be a perfectionist, someone who is purely motivated by money or someone who values family life. A project manager must know what influences the team member to be able to align the goals of the team to the goals of the project. If someone values family life and they are forced to work on the project every weekend for an extended period, this person’s productivity, quality or respect may suffer unless the project manager takes action. There are numerous theories on the link between motivation and performance, and some of the well-known ones include:

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Douglas McGregor’s Theory X Theory Y

Herzberg’s Two Factor Theory of Work Motivation

### SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)

The next stage is to get to know the goals, strengths and weaknesses of the individual team member. This is achieved through listening (a technique described later), face-to-face and informal meetings, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis and creating a skills matrix/inventory.

A SWOT analysis and skills matrix/inventory can be drawn up at the start of a project. The SWOT analysis will give a better understanding of the wider project environment together with the risks. The skills matrix/inventory provides an insight into which team member would be better suited to a particular role. These analyses also include soft skills as well as technical and managerial skills. If a team member has good written communication or negotiation skills over and above a technical skill, they may be called upon more readily to interact with a supplier than a team member who only has the technical competence. If these skills are lacking internally, then the project manager has the option to develop the team with focused training and mentoring. If this training is not an option, and an outside hire or consultant with the appropriate skills cannot be used, a risk to the project exists. The project manager also needs to evaluate how much handholding or supervision will be required. Some team members need more direction and support than others.

Teams are increasingly becoming multinational. Misunderstandings or misinterpretations can occur if the project manager is not sensitive to the cultural diversity of the team. This is especially true of language and work ethics. Project managers need to harness and exploit the cultural differences if they are to deliver multinational projects successfully.

Chapter 9 of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) Third Edition* provides an overview of these processes and includes a section on project team development (9.3). The section aims to improve the competency and interaction of team members to enhance the performance of the project. Objectives include:

Improve skills of team members in order to increase their ability to complete project activities

Improve feelings of trust and cohesiveness among team members in order to raise productivity through greater teamwork

### Four Stages of Team Development

During its lifetime, a team may go through four stages of development, each increasing in productivity. A project manager must be aware of the stage at which the team is working as each stage needs a different approach to managing. These four stages were first described in 1965 by Bruce W. Tuckman, a respected educational psychologist. He went on to refine and develop the model with Mary Ann Jensen in 1977.

The first stage of development is called “forming.” This starts when the team members come together. In this stage, team members work individually trying to gain acceptance within the group. Conflict is avoided, and the team members don’t integrate to any degree as they only look at the tasks to be completed. Impressions on the other team members are also formulated. This stage requires the project manager to direct the team.

“Storming” is the second stage. In this stage the team members start to compete, and there is conflict within the team. This stage requires the project manager to coach the team.

The third stage is “norming.” In this stage, the team members start to work as a cohesive unit without leadership and power issues. Team members start sharing information and ideas, and there is a sense of team spirit. This stage requires the project manager to support the team.

The most productive stage is “performing.” In this stage, the team members act as one for the good of the team. The team is flexible, and team members adapt to the needs of the team. Team members have a high commitment and trust each other. They may also be friends. Morale is high, and the team members are loyal and focused on the tasks at hand. This stage requires the project manager to delegate to the team.

There is a fifth stage, “adjourning,” when the team is disbanded.

Obviously the most advantageous team for a project manager is one that is higher up the productivity ladder. To be able to utilize these team techniques, a project manager must have a good understanding of soft skills that are applicable personally.

### Enhancing Your Communication Skills

Many of the soft skills utilized by a project manager rely on communication. A project manager must communicate effectively, clearly and without ambiguity in order to influence team members and stakeholders. The language and style of delivery, whether spoken or written, needs to be tailored to the recipient. Once the communication is sent, confirmation of its delivery is required and feedback is requested to ensure it is understood. There are models on communication such as The Johari Window, Shannon and Weaver’s transmission model and a basic model is provided in Chapter 10 of the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) Third Edition*.

The language must be:

Clear and simple

Reflect the communication style of the recipient, be it auditory (hearing), visual or kinesthetic (feeling)

Understood by the recipient (e.g., business or technical)

Culturally sensitive

In a format agreed in any contract or required by regulatory agencies

The delivery method must be:

Appropriate for the information content

Appropriate for the locality and technical capabilities

Appropriate for the time scale agreed

Cost effective

In a format agreed in any contract or required by regulatory agencies

The content must be:

In a format that can be read (i.e., don’t assume everyone has Visio)

Tailored for the recipient (i.e., low or high detail)

Emphasized or highlighted if action is required on important information

Legal and noncontentious

Relevant and accurate

Worded to request feedback if needed

In a format agreed in any contract or required by regulatory agencies

“We realized project management isn’t about charts, graphs, reports and statistics — it’s about communication. It also isn’t about a project manager sitting up high and broadcasting a project plan. It’s about everyone taking responsibility together to make the project work.”

Getting Real by 37signals

## **“Don’t Look at Me in That Tone of Voice!”**

If the content is to be delivered aurally, several additional soft factors must be taken into consideration. They include: tone of voice, body language, attitude, feedback and environment.

The tone of voice used to deliver a message can have more effect on the listener than the message itself. Observations have shown that if the tone of voice conflicts with the message being delivered, the listener will respond to the tone rather than the content. The tone usually needs to be positive. It can be persuasive, upbeat, encouraging, congratulatory, cheerful, convincing or welcoming.

The body language of the speaker must match his tone of voice. A project manager needs to understand his/her own body language and how it can be controlled. If a negative emotion is shown via body language when a positive message is being made, conflicting messages are sent to the listener, and the impact of the message is lessened. Positive body language includes smiling, nodding of the head, maintaining eye contact (dependent on culture) and being smartly dressed. During the deliver, the facial expressions and body language of the listeners need to be read for signs of boredom or puzzlement. To be effective at reading body language and avoiding misinterpretation of people’s idiosyncrasies, a project manager should get to know people as individuals. There are many books available going into further detail on body language and its multitude of interpretations.

A positive and assertive attitude, as apposed to one that is weak or aggressive, must always be maintained when trying to motivate listeners. Frequent eye contact with an open and relaxed posture is best, and above all, practice what you preach by setting a good example.

Communication is a two-way process. In order to confirm the message has been understood, a project manager must solicit feedback. The most effective way is to ask open-ended questions (what, why, how) that allow more than a “yes” or “no” response. If control of the discussion time is needed, then directed questions are useful.

To be more receptive to a message, the environment needs to be reasonably quiet and free from distractions. Listeners also must feel comfortable and not intimidated by their surroundings.

At the end of the message the project manager needs to summarize the important points together with the actions required of the listeners.

## **Listening Is a Skill**

Listening skills are part of any coach’s repertoire. At times, a project manager needs to be a coach and switch from being a passive listener to being an active listener. Active listening requires more concentration than passive listening. To actively listen, a project manager must:

- Concentrate on the speaker and what is being said
- Focus on the content and not the style of presentation
- Have an open mind (preconceived ideas block active listening)
- Ask questions or summarize a point if the meaning is not clear

Not interrupt

Check for conflicting body language signs

Be personally receptive and not fatigued

A fun test to determine someone’s listening skills is to pose this question to a colleague: “You are the driver of a Greyhound coach going to New York from Du Bois. Twenty passengers get on at the start. On the way, 33 passengers are picked up in Bloomsburg and two get out. Another 12 passengers are picked up at Stroudsburg junction. Twenty get out at Newark and the coach eventually reaches New York at 5:00 p.m. How old is the driver?” The correct answer is the age of the listener.

## **Stakeholder Management**

Stakeholders are an important and essential part of a project. A project manager cannot deliver projects without them. “People issues” relating to the project can often be resolved with the influence of a major sponsor. Methods of communication are written in the project communication plan, and soft skills are used in interacting with stakeholders. A project manager who has the trust and support of the major stakeholders has a much easier time. A power/influence matrix can be used to understand the key stakeholders who need to be managed carefully. The matrix maps the power of the stakeholder against his/her interest level:

- If a stakeholder has low power and interest, minimal effort is needed.
- If the power is high and interest low, they need to be kept satisfied.
- If the power is low and interest high, they need to be kept informed.
- If both power and interest are high, these people are key stakeholders.

There are various other soft techniques useful to a project manager. These include time management, running meetings, conflict and stress management, creativity and analytical thinking, problem solving, leadership and managerial skills. These are well-served by books or free reading material on business websites. *Behind Closed Doors — Secrets of Great Management* by Johanna Rothman and Esther Derby provides a good overview of many of the managerial skills.

## **Leader, Manager, Facilitator and Mentor**

A project manager is called upon at various times throughout a project to be a leader, manager, facilitator and mentor. The differences are subtle, but a project manager must know when to use the appropriate technique to move the project forward. A project manager also needs to gain the trust of his team and stakeholders.

Truly effective project managers must understand and use a methodology or framework. They must be experienced, have good business acumen and truly understand the business and its objectives. Finally, and most importantly, they should utilize the many soft skills described in this article for communication and interpersonal contact.

## **Bibliography**

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*This article was first published in ILTA’s July, 2006 white paper titled “Project Management — Our Plan for Your Plan” and is reprinted here with permission. For more information about ILTA, visit their website at [www.iltanet.org](http://www.iltanet.org).*