



# From Dread and Denial to High-Performance

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How do you move from regretting the day you ever signed up to be a project manager to a level of performance that relieves your stress and endears you to clients? Perhaps emulating successful project managers is the first step. Surprisingly, you may be practicing many of these skill sets in other aspects of your life already. It's simply a matter of integrating those skills into the framework of managing projects.

While every PM needs to schedule, budget and control projects, other equally critical skills are sometimes forgotten – or not deemed as important to project success as the core understanding of the “technical” side of project management. So what do successful project managers do differently?

They first master the skills of communication. Successful project managers communicate early and often – and they are as quick to communicate problem areas of a project

as they are the successful aspects. Successful PMs learn how to tailor their communications to a variety of audiences, including clients, internal staff members, shareholders of the organization, and the public at large. They have found ways to communicate up, down, and sideways by talking about what is important to any individual stakeholder – openly, honestly, and timely.

Secondly, successful project managers learn to see the forest and the trees. They are not so locked into the details of a project that they lose track of the bigger context. They learn to juggle the focus on detail and wide-angle vision by putting into place processes that serve as “early warning systems” on the need to intervene.

A third requirement for success as a project manager is to understand the interpersonal dynamics of an effective team. Effective project managers understand how a team evolves and how to deal with the peaks and valleys of

both productivity and morale. They appreciate the value of motivation and the importance of holding the team accountable for performance. And they often do it purely through the power of persuasion – an important tool in a matrix organization.

Another skill exhibited by successful project managers is proactive conflict management. If they don't go so far as embracing conflict, they certainly recognize it is a ubiquitous part of managing projects, and they turn it to constructive use. They master the art of win-win conflict resolution so that they don't give up their interests, nor does the other party. They consciously exert a cool demeanor when things get tense in order to deal with the merits of the issue rather than the emotional baggage that accompanies it.

Adaptability is another hallmark of successful project managers. They react quickly to changes on projects so that options are still available. They watch for trends so that they know when and how to intervene to get the project back on track. They anticipate risk so that they can compensate for it ahead of time if possible. One thing is certain in project management: we do not live in a static world, and effective PMs must learn to be adaptable.

To go from marginal performance to project success, PMs must treat lessons learned as more than checking a box. When they apply what they learned in the last project to the next one, their project gains from economies of scale, from a decline in rework, and from enhancing the relationship with the client. Clients believe the PM should be sophisticated enough to come down the learning curve on future projects. When the PM doesn't apply lessons

learned, it raises doubts in the client's mind about the ability of the project manager in other areas.

These are universal truths that we have found in our study of what makes some project managers effective and others not. But how do you gain these skills? As I mentioned earlier, you probably already do many of these things in other aspects of your life. You simply need to integrate them into your role as project manager.

For example, we can communicate extremely well when we are discussing something we are passionate about. If you like cars, you become animated when you talk to others about your interest. If you're a hunter or a fisherman, there's no lack of communication when you are in a social setting. We simply need to become passionate about what we do on projects and have the same zeal for discussing it with our stakeholders. If you have ever had to moderate disputes between your children, you already know how to seek a win-win agreement. Since you love both of your children, you seek a resolution that meets the interests of both sides. If you are married or in a serious relationship, you have already learned how to adapt and respond to changes in real-time.

So, what's the reward? Application of these skills can move you from an uneasy acceptance of the project management role to one in which you are consciously in control. You will have less stress, happier clients, and increased profitability.

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