

7 Essential Project Management Skills For 2020

By Ben Aston 01/01/2020

Which project management skills are the ticket for success?

I've written before about "What makes a great digital project manager?" which explores project manager strengths, habits, and approaches that all contribute to good project management.

In this article, I provide specific examples of project management skills you can develop to successfully lead teams and projects effectively and be an (even more) awesome project manager.

7 Project Management Skills To Master

We've trimmed our project management skills list to just seven areas that we think it's important to master to be an effective project manager – leadership, communication, time management, risk management, planning, negotiation, and subject matter expertise.

Let's explore this ideal project manager skills set!

Here is the list of project manager skills:

1. Leadership

If we've learned anything from years of leading projects, it's that great leadership is an essential skill to being a good project manager. Our leadership role means we lead and manage teams; setting the vision, motivating the team, serving them, coaching them and inspiring others.

We project managers often have a bad rep. Mention you're a project manager and all too often, people share their unenlightened thoughts on what we do; "Oh, you're one of those ones who boss everyone else around on a project." While that's true, anyone who's ever managed projects knows there is far more to project management than being a tin pot dictator who barks out orders to the team and then returns to their desk for a cup of tea and a slice of cake.

In fact, being good at *telling* others what to do, or *managing* is not even in our list of skills for a project manager. *Leading* others however, now that's a different story, one which is core to the success of any project manager, and we'll get to that shortly.

As project managers, we lead from both a strategic and operational perspective – we communicate the vision and get team (and organizational) buy-in, we resolve conflict, set goals, and evaluate performance and make sure team members have the tools, money, space etc. that they need to get things done.

But being a leader isn't just about creating a feel-good vibe for our teams – we have to enforce process and keep everyone on the team in line too. And while it's important to get everyone's buy-in, we know that we have the final call about what our team works on next, as well as the final responsibility for whether the project fails or succeeds. As Jane Callahan admonishes, "Even if the entire team is up-to-speed, remember that you, the project manager, are still in the lead. That means doing whatever it takes to get the project done, even if it's outside of your assigned duties." Ouch.

Every project needs a leader who supports the process, the team and client. They are the team's No.1 cheerleader and chief encourager, but at the same time, not afraid to call out the team when they drop the ball; they bring balance to the project and team. Leading them well means to serve them by taking responsibility for how you as a project manager are going to make your team's life better today. Be the person that moves mountains for them. Be the one that greases the wheels. Be the one to move all the barriers that could get in their way.

The key project management leadership skill to master in leadership is making sure you're leading, rather than just managing. That means providing a vision and a roadmap for success and serving and empowering your team to get there.

2. Communication

One of the essential **skills for project management** is the ability to communicate well – understanding and being understood. Great communication is the crux of any relationship and so the effectiveness of a project manager's communication has an impact not only on the project team but the client and stakeholders too.

'I wish my project manager would stop giving me so many project updates.' – said no client, ever. The more touchpoints you have with your client, the more solid the relationship will be, and the more likely the project will be a success. Good communication gets you continually realigned, and if you're doing it frequently enough, you'll ensure you are successful as you'll never deviate far from where the project needs to be to be a success.

We've discussed previously the importance of 'keep communicating'; communication isn't effective unless the person you're communicating to understands what you're trying to tell them. Frequent and effective communication will ensure that everyone is on the same page and help to avoid uncomfortable conversations and in future.

For our clients, communication and interpersonal skills are important for successful project stakeholder management so that people know what's going on, that they're not surprised. That means we need to take very seriously, our responsibility to convey vision, ideas, goals, and issues, as well as produce clear status reports and project presentations.

From the client's perspective, communication of project details in writing and a periodic status report is absolutely essential as it will help to reinforce the message and build rapport. We have also found status meetings and reports with our teams to be invaluable, as it helps us keep track of next steps, action items, project risks, budgets and process.

And for our teams, communication is critical. We've written before about 'Why our teams suck at doing what they're told (and what to do about it)' – in that article we propose that people don't do what we want them to do because we haven't been clear on **what** they need to do, **why** they need to do it, **how** they need to do it, and **when** they need to do it by. Clear communication and proper briefing is fundamentally about being understood. It's a dialogue, not a one-way, garbled message.

Effective communication is just as important in relation to project team dynamics. Human Resource adviser, Fred Holloway's observation that "You can tie back almost every employee issue –attendance, morale, performance, and productivity – to communication," applies just as much to project management as it does to HR, since a core part of the project manager's role is communicating with the project team.

However, effective communication doesn't just happen. It starts by putting in the time and effort required to get to know your team well and devising an appropriate communication plan that connects with the different personality types. For us, this has meant having to adapt our communications strategy from project to project, for the simple reason that we may have different team members for each project and a particular communication system or structure may not always work for every everyone.

The key project management communication skill to master is the ability to listen, to be clear and ensure you're understood. When information flows with the right messaging, at the right time, to the right person, through the right channel, almost any hurdle can be overcome.

3. Planning Skills

Project scheduling is a core project management skill, but one that surprisingly, many managers do not pay much attention to, says Elizabeth Harrin of Project Management Perspectives. But really, what is a project manager without a plan? Our ability to organize tasks in the right order, to hit the right outcome at the right time is a major part of our jobs as project manager, isn't it? It is absolutely critical that as project managers, we give scheduling the serious attention it deserves, and along with it, monitoring progress as the project moves forward and making tweaks to ensure that everything stays on track.

Proper planning means everything from meta to micro. There's the large scale obvious planning we need to get right to create great meeting plans, statements of work, estimates, timelines, resource plans and [briefs](#), to the more mundane – planning out your day, who you're going to talk to first, and how you are going to make time to keep your status documents up to date. Planning is all about finding ways to do all that you need to do as efficiently as possible.

The extent to which you're able to effectively plan will directly impact the project's ability to be successful. No matter how good you are at executing, without being able to properly plan a project, the project won't succeed.

The project management planning skill to master is planning to the extent that you're always ten steps ahead and always know 'what's next'. That means not only for success but for the disasters too. As a skilled project manager, you've always got a plan up your sleeve.

4. Time Management

As project managers, a huge part of our job is determining and communicating how other people will spend their time. But it's equally important to be aware of how we are managing our own time. Steven Covey's quote, "*The enemy of the best is the good*," applies really well when it comes to the project manager's management of time (theirs and their team's). There are a million and one *good* things you could be doing, but a good project manager recognizes that only a few things fall into the category of "best" and these few things are what need to come first each day. Knowing when to say "No" is a critical project management skill.

The problem is that important tasks usually get trumped by urgent tasks. If needed, do an 80/20 analysis of your current tasks. So, if you've got a limited amount of time in your day, how can you make sure you set aside time for important tasks so you don't get totally stressed out?

It's all about nailing the difference between urgent and important and Eisenhower's famous prioritization matrix mapping. As Eisenhower pointed out, "*What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.*"

Meetings are some of the biggest thieves of time. Between meetings that (unjustifiably) overrun their allocated time to those that are totally unnecessary, we have learnt over the years to save valuable time by engaging critical thinking skills that help us weigh what is important and what is not, and so have developed the ability to know when *not* to have a meeting or to simply pull the plug on a meeting that's gone off the rails. This is a valuable aspect of time management and a critical skill **for project management** that every good project manager must develop. A good strategy that works really well in managing meeting time is to always have an agenda and stick to it.

Successful project managers also respect their teammates' time, so being able to read the body language of people in the room is also critical to ensuring that you're staying on course. Lastly, look for opportunities to delegate responsibilities, multi-task, or rearrange your schedule as necessary.

The project management time-management skill to master is doing the right thing. If you can make sure you don't get caught up in wild goose chases on your projects and can stick to focusing the best part of your time on the important things everyone will win.

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5. Risk Management

Project managers are always an easy target when projects don't go to plan. Regardless of the circumstances, everyone wonders whether the project manager could have foreseen and prevented the risk before it became an issue.

Project sponsors hate surprises and good risk management is one way of avoiding surprises, especially the nasty ones. Risks are often not urgent which means many project managers fail to consider risks as seriously as they should. You can stay on top of your project by controlling risk, and actively mitigating against it as far as you can.

The skill for effective risk management is really experience – it's knowing what could go wrong. And having the humility to ask your team too. You obviously first need to identify risk and the earlier you do that, the better your chances of avoiding the risk occurrence.

It doesn't end there, however. Risk identification must be followed by a risk plan for what to do about them. This involves assigning a probability, a cost, an owner and using mitigation strategies that are suitable for the risk and the appetite for the client for things going wrong. These action plans need to be incorporated into your main plan and tracked as well.

Effectively managing that risk has massive benefits. Your clients are going to be happier because you are able to improve delivery for your clients and be more efficient with your clients' resources to provide them with better value for money. But it's not all about them – you get the added benefit of finding yourself spending less time juggling hot potatoes and unnecessarily firefighting unwelcome surprises.

The project management risk management skill to master is the ability to identify risks well before they become issues and come up with effective mitigation plans so that the risk of them ever becoming issues is nullified.

6. Negotiation Skills

Project management is somewhat like politics; it often brings together a disparate group of people, often with competing interests, and our job is to get these different interests on the same page, so that we can accomplish project goals. In other words, a good project manager must be an excellent negotiator.

“Negotiating the use of resources, budgets, schedules, scope creep, and a variety of other compromises that are unavoidable” for a project manager says Cesar Abeid, and “[k]nowing how to negotiate well so that all parties are satisfied is a key skill for the successful project manager.”

As project managers we can find ourselves negotiating with just about everyone, every day. Whether we're negotiating for resource from our fellow project managers, negotiating for support from senior management, negotiating with 3rd party suppliers or with clients – there are always disparate interests that we need to try and align. The key to successfully negotiating is to 'win' without burning any bridges. After all, unlike sales negotiations, we aren't usually lucky enough to just be able to walk away from a deal if the terms aren't right. We have to find a middle ground.

Our negotiation skills require that we invest time to understand relationships and stakeholders' interests, so that we can clearly identify what is needed to move our projects forward. Failure to do this puts us at risk of ignoring critical relationships, which will, unfortunately lead to failure.

Discussions about budgets, resource allocation, and timelines can become adversarial and counterproductive if not handled tactfully. Successful project managers know how to find compromises where possible and how to hold a firm line without damaging their workplace relationships.

The key project management negotiation skill to master is finding that middle ground – working out compromises so everyone that matters feels like they've won!

7. Subject matter expertise

Even if you think you've got those other project management skills nailed – subject matter expertise is always an area to grow in because the world of digital is moving so fast; there's always something new to learn. A good project manager needs to know enough to first come up with a plan and then to execute and manage it properly and lead the team into success.

Effective project managers need to know, 'just enough to be dangerous' about the work that their teams execute. You need to know the platforms and systems your teams use, and the possibilities and limitations of those so that you can have intelligent and informed conversations with clients, team, stakeholders, and suppliers.

You've got to have a solid knowledge of the process of delivering and an understanding of how and why it's done that way, even if your job is not actually technical. Knowing technically what's feasible, and what's not and even more importantly, how much work might be involved in a type of project is invaluable.

It means you can very quickly give estimates as to the length of time and cost of a project. It's also very helpful when you're managing developers – coming up with workarounds to issues or being able to ascertain whether or not enough progress is being made as it should. It also very useful in client facing situations as it gives you the confidence to explain where a project is really at, rather than having to give vague answers about the project being 'in development'.

Critical to gaining sound knowledge is putting in the time to *learn*. Learning is important. Not only does it give us better grasp of the projects we lead, it helps us to better understand and interact with our teams, clients and stakeholders and the functional leaders within the organization. The result is successful project delivery every time.

It's worth trying to develop subject matter expertise not just for project management and your project management toolkit, but across the full project lifecycle. That means understanding how things work in strategy, service design, product design, creative conceiving, user experience, design, content development, front end development, back end development, QA, hosting, content delivery networks, SEO, analytics, CMS, social media, or media (yes even banner ads). And that's just the start. That's a lot to get in your noggin!

The key project management subject matter expertise skill to master is just about everything when it comes to digital. If you can be the designated expert on everything from apache Solr and algorithms to Weibo and web hosting (no I couldn't think of anything beginning with a z!), not only will your team and agency love you, but your clients will too.

How To Develop Project Manager Skills

Knowing the skills of a project manager is not enough.

As project managers, we're responsible for managing work through the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements. This PMI definition of project management succinctly communicates the idea that our jobs as project managers demand that we possess varied competencies, one of which is skills. Yes, we must be knowledgeable; yes, we must have the right tools; but critically, we must know how to apply the right techniques to our projects.

Knowing project management theory without the skills to apply what we know is useless. Having the right tools without the skill to put them to good use is meaningless.

How to improve your project manager skills? Start by testing yourself and see what areas you may need to work on. Then, build your project management skills list. Include the project manager technical skills you'd like to learn, as well as the soft skills of project management where you could develop more. Use your list to guide the development of your project management competencies. If you're not sure where to start, ask around—the vibrant DPM community has answers for you.

What Do You Think?

Creating realistic project plans, budgets, estimating time and effort, etc. are all things that a good project manager must do. But keeping

your work organized and your teams informed and happy is critical to your success and these skills are what you need to achieve these. We hope you will incorporate these skills into your work if you're not already doing so, and if you are, well, keep at it. They're great skills that will help you become the best project manager you can be.

Does this list of skills seem complete to you? What are the project management skills you're trying to develop? And what are the things you look for in others? Join the conversation below and share what you think about project skills!