

# Project Management Is Problem Management

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**IN THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES**, software project management is a challenging and complex endeavor. Yet, I often see PMs make it even more difficult by having the wrong set of expectations for the role.

Plain and simple, project management is problem management. Were that not the case, there would be no need for project managers. Rather, a request for execution would be made and all the pieces (resources, technology, requirements, timeline, etc.) would simply align and the work would proceed smoothly to completion without any need for shepherding.

The truth is, our role exists because that is not the reality. Resources are overallocated, technologies and skill sets are incompatible, requirements are unclear, and timelines are unrealistic. I frequently work with PMs who view those types of issues as inconveniences, annoyances, or “problems” caused by external forces that are interfering with their work. If only *they* had done this, if only *they* had thought that out better, if only *they* would give me more time, then all these needless complications would be gone and I could finally get on with the business of project management.

Needless to say, these folks spend a lot of their time frustrated, tense, and irritable.

The fact of the matter is, smoothing all those needless bumps and complications is the business of project management. Our role is to plan better, think more clearly, and have a greater strategic vision that those who sponsor a



project, and also those who work to deliver it. We're here because executing a project is an inherently messy business and individuals with our unique skills and temperaments are necessary to ensure that the inevitable difficulties get squashed, circumvented, or massaged into nonissues.

To complicate things further, this does not apply only to the mechanics of managing a project. Sometimes *people* need to be “massaged into nonissues” as well. The most challenging aspect of a project isn't necessarily the technology or timeline, but can be the personalities involved in the effort. This can be anyone from resources assigned to the project to a senior oversight committee.

Some easy archetypes: the “resentful resource,” who seems perversely committed to undermining the PM's authority; the “nervous stakeholder,” ever anxious, is impossible to soothe; or the “back-seat PM,” a stakeholder or project participant who feels compelled to assert his/her opinion on how the project should be run at every possible opportunity.

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this tip to discuss how best to manage the various interpersonal issues that can arise in a project. Suffice it to say that the need to manage issues in this realm appears frequently, and is as much within the scope of our project management responsibilities as is understanding the work breakdown structure or maintaining an accurate project plan.

If we view these situations not as obstacles to doing the job but, more appropriately, as the heart of the job itself, the work will be smoother, calmer, and more tranquil. Relatively speaking, of course.