

# What are the habits of successful project managers?

Duy Thanh Phan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Concordia University, Montreal QC, Canada  
duythanh.phan@mail.concordia.ca

VCS: <https://github.com/thanhpd/soen6841>

**Abstract.** Good project managers possess people-oriented skills and develop effective professional relationships with colleagues. Project leaders need to embrace interacting with people via effective communication. That means they should welcome interruptions positively and reschedule their work strategically. Successful project leaders must also have certain leadership and interpersonal qualities, such as those listed in The Scout Law.

**Keywords:** Project management, people-oriented, time management, habits, leadership.

## 1 Introduction

In contemporary society, the global economy has become project-oriented more than ever due to the expansion of project management within less project-focused industries, such as healthcare, publishing, and professional services [1]. As a result, the project manager has a pivotal role in ensuring the success of the projects. However, while there is a shortage of project management workers in various industries [1], it is unavoidable that not every project manager possesses the necessary mix of competencies to succeed. This paper, based on the scope of the course SOEN 6841 Software Project Management, will attempt to synthesize and analyze the given reading article to expand the topic of successful project leaders on two items: people-oriented leadership and necessary habits for successful project managers. The work aims to give practitioners in project management a holistic understanding of different types of leadership and habits that a successful project leader should have.

The paper is structured as follows: (1) introduction; (2) identification of the problem and questions; (3) research methodology; (4) definition of a successful project manager; (5) leadership styles of project managers; (6) habits for project managers and (7) conclusion.

## 2 Problem and Questions

The main topic problem in the given journal is: What are the necessary leadership styles and behaviors for one to become a successful project manager?

From the main topic, we can identify the following research questions:

- Question 1: What is the definition of a “successful project manager”?
- Question 2: What are the leadership styles of project managers?
- Question 3: What habits should be adopted by project managers to become successful?

### **3 Methods and Methodology**

The methodology employed for this paper involves a systematic and comprehensive approach. Firstly, the main topics in the reading material are chosen to be explored, as seen in the literature review. Next, a search strategy was employed using the selected topics to locate the relevant literature. The main query database was from Google Scholar, but data from professional organizations such as PMI and APM was also collected. After the literature selection process to screen the suitable work, pertinent information such as key findings and methodologies were extracted and used to identify patterns, trends, similarities, and differences compared to the original journal. This paper also provides an analysis of the reading material itself to give an objective overview of the quality of the material.

### **4 Definition of a Successful Project Manager**

Successful project manager is a complex term that has different interpretations among people. A naïve definition would be that a successful project manager possesses the necessary skills to lead different projects to completion within the budget constraint and achieve the full scope as planned. However, various literature sources suggest that the definition of a successful project manager goes beyond the traditional measures of time, cost, and scope. Turner, J.R. (2022) emphasizes achieving strategic goals and aligning project outcomes with organizational goals [2]. In this context, success also encompasses a broad range of strategic perspectives. D.I. Cleland and L.R. Ireland (2002) define a successful project manager as someone capable of handling the project dynamics, coping with changes, and managing resources effectively to achieve the goal within specific constraints [3]. Their definition of success focuses on pragmatic skills. Schwalbe, K. (2015) considers that a successful project manager can balance technical skills with effective communication and stakeholder management [4]. He focuses on the importance of meeting stakeholder expectations, delivering quality outcomes, and managing project constraints. It is evident that successful project managers do not just focus on the project outcomes but also pay attention to the organizational and human elements in the project. Practitioners must adopt a large set of skills that can only be mastered over time.

## **5 Leadership styles of project managers**

### **5.1 Literature Review**

To be an effective leader, the project manager must have not only one but many different styles that are applicable to different situations. Mastering them will allow project managers to increase efficiency. There are many ways to define leadership styles. Margules (2011) provides that the available leadership styles are visionary, affiliate, participative, coaching, and pacesetting [5]. Blaskovics, B. (2016) identified the following leadership styles based on different criteria: trait, behavior or style, contingency, charisma or vision, emotional intelligence, and competency [6]. Bass (1998) categorized leadership styles into transformational leadership and transactional leadership [7].

The aforementioned examples showcased different factors to categorize leadership styles. However, academia has a consensus: there are two dimensions linked to leadership. They are people-orientation and task-orientation [8]. People-orientation leadership emphasizes the team members by paying attention to their well-being, developing their skills, and cultivating a positive professional relationship with them via supportive and cooperative actions. On the other hand, the task orientation style focuses on the tasks to do and setting up a framework to get them done. This can range from enforcing compliance via rules and procedures to using power to achieve organizational order.

### **5.2 Project Managers and Time Fragmentation**

The journal highlighted a big problem for project managers when adopting people-oriented leadership: time fragmentation and interruptions.

Time is one of the big constraints and sacred resources in professional work. It cannot be stored away and also cannot be extended. This is particularly true for managerial personnel such as project managers. Assuming a project manager will manage multiple projects, their day-to-day work will involve dealing with projects or issues that are the most pressing problems. In addition, they will also need to take care of short-term goals and long-term targets. They are overburdened with work but tend not to have much uninterrupted time due to distractions such as urgent emails, phone calls, frequent meetings, and so on. While interruptions are not always bad, such as in the case of making decisions on simple tasks, they can lead to subpar performance for complex decision tasks [9].

An individual operates at full capacity when they are in the flow state [10]. However, a project manager gets interrupted frequently daily [9]. Like the flow state, interruptions are costly for project managers because they will need some time to go back to the thinking process of the interrupted task. Therefore, to get important things done, the journal recommended that the project manager schedule important work outside of normal working hours. However, if the leader has no other choice but to deal with multiple tasks and goals within working hours, they will need to develop a prioritization scheme so that the most urgent matters can be resolved first.

### 5.3 People-oriented leadership

People-oriented management, as established in the literature review, places a heavier focus on the team members over the results. This approach has many advantages. Firstly, it enhances team morale and motivation. When the working environment prioritizes relationships and the well-being of individuals, the team members will feel valued and supported. This will incentivize them to connect to their job more, such as investing more time and effort in their work, leading to higher levels of productivity and job satisfaction. Secondly, the management can lead to better communication and interactions between team members. Team members will be more likely to share their opinions and ideas among the team. This interaction creates a culture of transparency and cooperation, which are essential for project outcomes. The third advantage is that people-oriented leadership cultivates strong bonds between team members. Since they feel connected and care about the success of their peers, they are more likely to collaborate and support each other. The created cohesion is critical for the team to navigate complex projects and achieve common targets.

From this, we may conclude that the people-oriented approach is one of the best leadership styles for project managers. However, it is worth noting that adopting this approach is not easy. It requires practice and perseverance from the project managers to deal with the fact that the approach can be seen as ineffective compared to the non-people orientation approaches [11].

### 5.4 Criticism

The working style section in the journal is imperfect and not without fault, such as the simple approach that leads to the conclusion. The author of the journal text states that effective project managers should adopt a people-oriented management style without giving many persuasive reasons. In reality, they might not be true. For instance, in the military context, it is of the utmost importance that the goals are achieved no matter what for security-related reasons. In this case, a task-oriented approach may be more suitable. Another problematic point is that successful project leaders establish professional relationships quickly and enjoy interactions with team members. This may disadvantage managers who are more on the introverted spectrum, even though they can still maintain effective communication while excelling in different aspects such as detailing or planning. As established in the literature review, effective leadership is diverse, so a more extensive evaluation of different leadership styles based on the nature of the project and team dynamics would provide a more balanced view.

The text also explores a difference between project managers and individual contributors, which is time fragmentation. While it is important, other complex aspects of project management, such as communication and planning, were not addressed in the given passage. The author only gave one suggestion regarding time fragmentation: accepting interruptions and rearranging the work outside of office hours. Other techniques for managing tasks within working hours, such as task prioritization, were not touched upon.

## **6 Habits of Successful Project Managers**

### **6.1 Definition of Habits in Project Management**

What is the definition of a ‘habit’? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is “A settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, esp. one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary; a settled practice, custom, usage; a customary way or manner of acting” [12]. While habit seems like a simple terminology everyone knows, its definition varies among people [13]. The same situation also applies in the context of project management literature. Not many published project management papers, including the given journal, focus on the exact term ‘habit.’ They tend to swap ‘habit’ with other terminologies. For instance, Warner and Summers (2016) consider the habits of successful project managers to be significant skills and character traits [14]. Singhal and Bhatt (2014), and Cardozo (2002) both refer to the work of Stephen Covey (1989) that encapsulates a much broader range than the typical understanding of a habit and define a habit as an intersection of knowledge (what to do and why), skill (how to do), and desire (want to do) [15]. The latter definition explains why there is not much academic work on project management habits because most papers just focus on technical competencies and skills, a subset of habits in general.

### **6.2 Put the journal suggestion in perspective**

The journal defines a list of eleven habits for successful project managers. They are trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, and clean. According to the author of the journal, these qualities were taken from a workshop and reflected similarly to the Scout Law of Boy Scouts of America [16].

To put the list in perspective, a comparison of the journal with three other papers strictly written about habits in project management by Warner & Summers (2016), Singhal & Bhatt (2014), and Cardozo et al. (2002). Table 1 below summarizes the comparison. While certain habits such as trustworthiness and communication are shared, the journal lacks focus on aspects closely tied to the management process, as identified in the other papers.

Although the journal may miss some marks, it is worth considering the suggestion's usefulness for project management practitioners. To examine the relevance of the suggestion list to the field, an association was created between the list and the twelve Project Management Principles [19]. They are defined by the Project Management Institute, a credible organization in the field, intended to guide the behavior of project team members. The results are summarized in Table 2. The results indicate that the suggestions are useful mostly on Stewardship and Leadership principles, whereas the other criteria are not addressed. This further suggests that the habits proposed by the journal may not encompass all the necessary elements to meet the comprehensive project management standard.

**Table 1.** Comparisons of habits for successful project managers in different literature sources

<b>Literature sources</b> <b>Habits</b>	<b>The given journal</b>	<b>Warner, M., &amp; Summers, R. (2016) [14]</b>	<b>Singhal, A., &amp; Bhatt, P. (2014) [17]</b>	<b>Cardozo, E.L., Director, E. and People, H.E.,(2002) [18]</b>
Trustworthy	✓	✓	✓	
Loyal	✓			
Helpful	✓			
Friendly	✓			
Courteous	✓	✓		
Kind	✓	✓		
Obedient	✓			
Cheerful	✓	✓		
Thrifty	✓	✓		
Brave	✓			
Clean	✓			
Define goals and success		✓	✓	✓
Approach systematically to procurement		✓		
Managing risk carefully		✓	✓	
Build team excellence and synergy		✓	✓	✓
Meet stakeholder expectation		✓	✓	✓
Communicate well	✓ <sup>1</sup>	✓	✓	✓
Be proactive, take ownership		✓	✓	✓
Enable core team to make decisions			✓	
Celebrate project milestones			✓	
Set up a project recognition system			✓	
Plan from finish to start		✓	✓	✓
Prioritize properly		✓	✓	✓
Adopt the 80/20 rule				✓
Improve continuously				✓

<sup>1</sup> The suggestion list does not have this item, but the journal included it in another section.

**Table 2.** Association between proposed qualities in the given journal and PMI Project Management Principles

PMI Project Management Principles Proposed qualities	Stewardship	Team	Stakeholders	Value	Systems Thinking	Leadership	Tailoring	Quality	Complexity	Risk	Adaptability and Resiliency	Change
Trustworthy	✓					✓						
Loyal	✓					✓						
Helpful	✓					✓						
Friendly						✓						
Courteous						✓						
Kind						✓						
Obedient	✓					✓						
Cheerful						✓						
Thrifty	✓			✓	✓							
Brave						✓						
Clean												

In addition to the incomplete information, the journal's suggestions are also not perfect due to the flaws in the research methodology.

Firstly, the author acquires the information from only one workshop. Since we do not know the number of participants, their genders, current professions, and so on in the workshop, the sample size is unlikely to represent all demographics. This greatly reduces the effectiveness of the result because a representative sample ensures the study is inclusive and reflects the community of interest [20]. In the study context, if all participants in the workshop were non-managers, then the list would just reflect the wishes that team members want the managers to have and would omit necessary skill sets in management. While cheerful, clean, and obedient traits are valuable, other diverse and inclusive perspectives could be explored.

Secondly, the author mentioned that the workshop happened "a long time ago." This brings uncertainties because the results may be out-of-date. The project management landscape is changing quickly with digitization and customer demands [1]. This shift demands new skills from project managers and may render the old list obsolete. Therefore, it is necessary to validate the results before making the claims.

Thirdly, the author draws a connection between the list of items and Scout Law and considers it to be the single source of truth. While realizing the relationship between them is important, using an unrelated framework to draw all the necessary qualities for project management means that the list may include redundant facts

while missing other important factors. The analogy oversimplifies the complexity of professional project management. Project management requires a balance of leadership, technical skills, and adaptability, which may not align with youth leadership principles.

### **6.3 Core Habits for Success**

From the data synthesis, it is possible to identify several core behaviors that are highly important to project leaders. Due to the demonstration above and the limitations in the assignment, it is virtually impossible to determine all the required habits for a project manager to succeed. Instead, the analysis will only focus on the two core items that I found to be of utmost importance: Communicative and Trustworthy. They are also the most prominent themes in project management literature.

#### **Communicative**

Many academic and professional bodies in project management have stated that ineffective communication is the most common source of failure in development projects. For example, PMI revealed that 56 percent of the wasted project budget comes from poor communication [21]. A well-communicated project manager would ensure that the information can be retrieved and expressed to the right personnel at the right time without any loss. There are many factors that the project manager needs to practice to make their communication truly effective:

The first criterion is to identify the audience. A project may have many stakeholders, but their importance to the project may vary. No important stakeholders should be ignored because their input may influence the project's direction.

Next, the project manager needs to figure out the right message content to convey. For example, the investors may want to know the current project progress, while team members will likely want to know the project's future trajectory and the impact of their contributions. The message must be concise, specific, and relevant. The project manager should have a high level of understanding of the project to deliver useful information to the stakeholders.

Thirdly, the project manager should foster effective communication within the team. That means the project manager does not have to initiate the conversation. Rather, their team members will do so. With openness and more information from the manager, team members can better understand tasks and objectives to produce high-quality outcomes.

#### **Trustworthy**

Regarding the human element of project management, trust is considered the most crucial factor of project success [22]. When there is distrust within the team and with the leaders, the team's productivity and cohesion will likely be affected severely. For example, Santosos et al. concluded that the lack of trust in the leaders would create an "atmosphere of suspicion, fear, low levels of commitment, and lack of willingness to collaborate and share knowledge" [23]. It is not easy for project managers to acquire



trust from various stakeholders, so they need to demonstrate it through actions to showcase their competency, integrity and certainty.

To demonstrate competency, the project manager should showcase his/her expertise in methodologies, tools, and industry best practices. The leaders also need to demonstrate strong problem-solving skills. The issues that arise must be addressed quickly and efficiently, with a heavy involvement from both the leader and the team members to foster common understanding.

There are several ways to demonstrate integrity. Firstly, the managers should be open and transparent about the project's progress, challenges and changes. Both good and bad news should be shared in time with stakeholders to identify risks and build mitigations in the project, which can cultivate the manager's credibility. The leaders need to have high accountability, which means they take responsibility for mistakes and setbacks.

To express certainty, the project manager needs to ensure that their vision is clear, such as in the project's objectives. This creates a sense of direction for the team. The manager also needs to make decisions consistently and communicate their rationale. This working style is a measuring rod for team members to follow predictably.

## 7 Conclusion

The given text gave more insight into the following question: what habits are demonstrated by successful project managers? It provides insights into the habits and attributes of successful project managers, drawing parallels between effective project leadership and the qualities found in the Scout Law. The synthesis and analysis show that project managers should adopt various working styles suitable for different situations. The people-oriented approach is one popular way for project leaders to boost the team's productivity. Project managers also need a good time management strategy to avoid the negative consequences of interruptions. The journal also made some good points about the attributes of successful project managers regarding leadership, interpersonal, and professional qualities such as effective communication and trustworthiness. However, the 2-page limitation of the journal and a flaw in the research methodology show that the arguments are not as strong as they should be. This prompts practitioners in the project management field to look outside the scope of the given material to master the necessary skills to become a successful project manager.

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