5 Practical Habits for Today's Project Manager
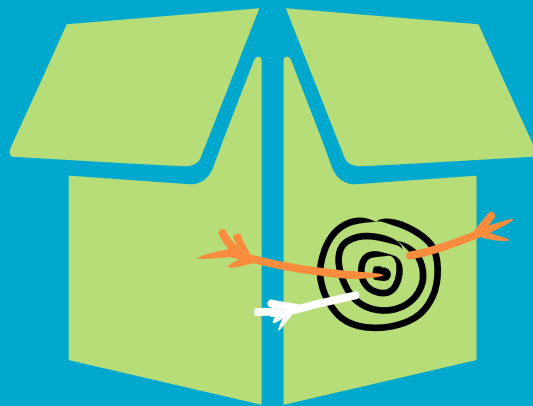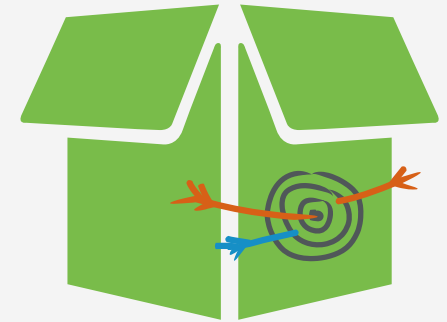
How to make a successful impact on teams and projects.

≋ **Liquid**Planner®

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Almost every project could be done better, and an infinite quantity of information is now available that could make that happen" – **DAVID ALLEN**

We're all project managers these days.

Your title might vary, and you might not make the final decision for your team – but the work you do and the skills you need are the same ones that make great project managers.

Skilled PMs strive for results by motivating the best work from their team. They collaborate effectively, ask the right questions, think ahead and anticipate the twists and turns in the road while having the courage to tackle a variety of challenging issues (from demanding clients to project surprises).

Here are five essential habits to develop in order to be an effective project manager:

1 Be transparent

2 Be a vigilant collaborator

3 Make ranged estimates

4 Embrace uncertainty and adapt to change

5 Use data to make decisions

#1 Be transparent

"A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity." – DALAI LAMA
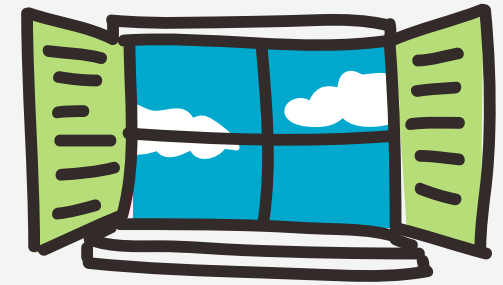
Why transparency matters

Accountability

Transparency motivates people to deliver on their commitments. When a project is visible to the entire team, people rise to a higher level of accountability and performance. If your team mates are doing great work on their parts of the project, it's going to motivate you to do the same.

Unites and motivates teams

Projects thrive when teams are informed and engaged. When everyone on a team has visibility and access into a project, they're motivated by the sense that they're working for a common goal. Purpose and connection are two of the essential human needs.

No more bad surprises

Projects managers don't like surprises; stakeholders and direct management like them even less. Transparency means you can't hide the bad and the ugly in an attempt to only showcase the good. Honesty rules, and transparency makes for a truthful work environment.

Builds trust with clients and peers

Transparency is the first step in gaining trust. And trust inspires confidence. Stakeholders need to trust that the team will provide visibility into the project and all its potential challenges as the events unfold. When stakeholders trust a project team, they'll invest the resources needed to do the best work.

How to put transparency into action

- Use collaborative and cloud-based project management software and tools.

- Share the project schedule and keep it updated and visible 24x7.

- Share the risk and issues with all the stakeholders up front.

- Communicate problems early and brainstorm solutions as a team.

- Listen to your team, share team members' ideas and be an advocate of great ideas. Also, give credit where credit is due.

- Know when *not* to be transparent. Know which information needs privacy (financials, HR details, contracts) and then relax and be an open book.

- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."

- Don't get pressured into giving a random answer. Instead, say something like, "Let me and the team do some re-estimating and I'll have an updated plan to you by 9 a.m."

- Have courage. Be honest and direct about any problems, and remember: Everyone on your team wants the same outcome.

- Share a document and get feedback on it.

- Be honest and direct about a seemingly unsolvable problem. It's part of the job to portray a realistic picture of what's going on.

Engaged, happy employees are

TWO TIMES

more productive than those who aren't.

2x

#2 Be a vigilant collaborator

"No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra." – **H.E. LUCCOCK**

Why collaboration matters

Better ideas, quicker solutions

A great idea is usually born from a series of smaller hunches and notions. And most of the time, some of those hunches come from different people's brains. The more you can lasso those hunches, and come together with people who bring different strengths and point-of-views to the table, the more likely you are to hatch a really, really good idea – from an elegant solution to a complex problem, to a brand new shining product or feature. Plus, you'll get there faster as a group than as an individual.

Improves communication

The powerful combo of collaboration and communication makes engagement and work quality sky rocket. With consistent interaction, teams get the job done rather than procrastinate because no one seems to be waiting, watching or even caring.

Keeps virtual teams on track

There needs to be one platform location (i.e., a cloud-based tool) where people can access projects and tasks, make comments, attach documents and see real-time status updates. Plus, emerging Millennial project managers will expect to rely on collaboration and communication tools to deliver across their virtual teams.

People forget about 40% of what they hear after 20 minutes. After one day, they will forget nearly 70% of the information.

How to put collaboration into action

- Practice clear, honest and direct communication skills.

- Model a collaborative, communicative culture: Ask questions, clarify goals, reach out to team members to share information and see how they're doing.

- Ask for feedback and input from everyone involved.

- Keep lines of communication open between the team and the client. This will make everyone feel a part of the project and more willing to share ideas.

- Use cloud-based project management software and collaboration tools that provide:

  - Real-time access to project status and team availability
  - Access to projects and tasks 24/7 from wherever someone's working
  - Commenting in the software rather than generating email strings
  - Document attachment and sharing capabilities
  - An updated view of where all the projects stand at all times, across time zones
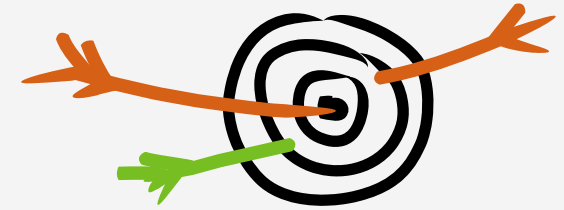
20-25% **The estimated jump in productivity thanks to today's social technologies.**
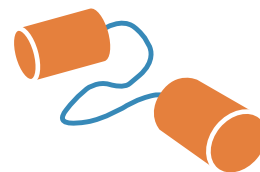
The tools we use to communicate will change over time but the habit of open and direct communication is technology-independent and evergreen.

#3 Make ranged estimates

"Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." – **DWIGHT EISENHOWER**
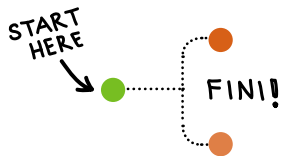
Why ranged estimations matter

You can't make accurate single-point predictions

Unless your last name is Nostradamus, your ability to predict the future will be based on logic and educated best guesses. Effective project managers use ranged estimates based on best/worst case scenarios to set realistic expectations of a project's delivery date(s).

Two point estimation is easier, and reliable

Imagine that you're asked to estimate an end-date on a high-profile project that you've *never done before*? Feeling stressed?

Now, imagine you're asked to come up with low and high range estimates for the work based on best/worst case scenarios. Feeling better? The estimation process suddenly becomes easier. No more throwing a dart and crossing your fingers!

Ranged estimates are realistic and trustworthy

Ranged estimates capture uncertainty, optimize predictability, productivity and the bottom line. The result: a project rooted in reality, and an end-goal that the entire team can believe in. Bonus: Making best/worst case estimates is a learning tool – the more you do it, the better you get at it.

How to put range estimates into action

Using project management software that lets you make two-point ranged estimates is an easy start. Then, follow these steps – no matter which PM tool you use:

1 Ask your team to provide a low and high end estimate for the work, keeping in mind all the best/worst case scenarios possible.

2 Make sure that the low and high estimates are realistic and based on the team's collective experience. If you're not sure, ask around.

3 Forecast best and worst case finish dates based on the ranged estimation. If you have a project management software that lets you make ranged estimates, it will roll up all the individual task estimations into the final project dates.

4 Rinse and repeat for each task.

You can also make ranged estimates on remaining work, and continue to forecast progress and delivery dates. This approach alleviates any anxiety or pressure to be correct in effort estimation.

39%

43%

18%

of all projects fail (cancelled, not completed, or delivered and never used).

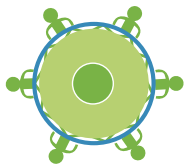of all projects are challenged (late, over budget and/or with less than the required features and functions).

of all projects succeed (delivered on time, on budget with required features and functions).

#4 Embrace uncertainty and adapt to change

"It's a bad plan that admits of no modification." – **PUBLILIUS SYRUS**

Why planning for change matters

Promotes risk management

All projects come with a level of uncertainty – that's life. Uncertainty can result in schedule delays, poor estimates and a variety of unexpected change requests. Rather than ignoring the issue, adopt solutions that embrace and manage uncertainty – and you'll be one step ahead of the game when those change orders come rolling in.

It's more productive to be proactive than reactive

Change is going to happen – so make the most of it. The requirements for software projects are always evolving; a building might have an agreed-to design but general contractors know there will be delays and hold-ups. When teams establish processes up front to address these incoming changes, they respond with experience and solutions, rather than with a reactive wave of panic. Your clients – and organization – will love you for your savvy adaptability.

Being flexible provides better customer service

If requirements aren't completely defined or a client shifts goals a few months into a project, it's OK! Project managers have a customer service role to play in addition to a delivery role. Your client will value your team if you meet their changes by listening to their plans, and then addressing the impact of the changes going forward.

How to embrace change and uncertainty

➕ Be more flexible.

➜ Consider using an agile project management style for smaller, faster-moving projects.

➜ Use time as a contingency buffer.

➜ Implement the risky features first.

➜ If you can, keep the dates and change the scope.

➕ Speak with confidence and probability about commitment dates.

➜ Use tools that support ranged estimates.

➜ Use data to predict finish dates with probability.

➜ Show management how the project captures uncertainty and plans for changes.

**➕ Identify risks and add extra time to the high point estimates.**

➜ Determine which portion of the project carries the greatest amount of risk.

➜ Based on the identified risks, see where you might need to allocate more time in the schedule. For example, add a time contingency buffer of one week before a key milestone.

➜ Add the extra time to the high estimation of your best/worst case estimate. This is your way of accepting that the risk could occur, and making it visible in your ranged estimations.

➜ Incorporate tribal knowledge and past project expertise.

Agile firms grow revenue
37% FASTER
and generate 30% higher profits than non-agile companies.

#5 Use data to make decisions

"Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there." **– WILL ROGERS**
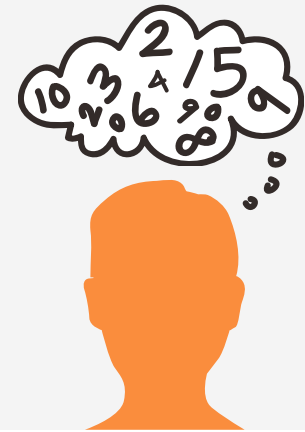
Why data matters

Separates fact from fiction

Project status reporting is a way to measure (and balance) what you *feel* and what you *know*. Ideally, a project manager evaluates a project's metrics objectively to come to a subjective conclusion. However, some project managers make the mistake of avoiding project metrics and simply relying on a subjective feeling to determine if a project is on track or not. That practice will not fly in the board room.

Gets buy-in and removes emotional reactions

By adopting a data driven approach, you let the data tell the story rather than depending on unfounded promises to do "everything you can" to deliver the project on time. Data instills confidence that the decision was a logical one rather than an emotional one. Pulling the plug on a failing project can be a tough decision as precious budgets get wasted. By using financial forecasts, managers can make better decisions to either cut their losses or continue on after some project management changes.

YIKES!

**40% of companies have NO RECOVERY PROGRAM for troubled projects.**

How to put data into action

➕ Add schedule metrics, open issue counts and financial metrics to your status reports.

➕ Ask for an updated remaining effort estimate based on the progress made. This is the most natural way for people to think about the future and minimizes the social pressure to give an answer that conflicts with the data.

➕ Give management target dates, not percent completes.
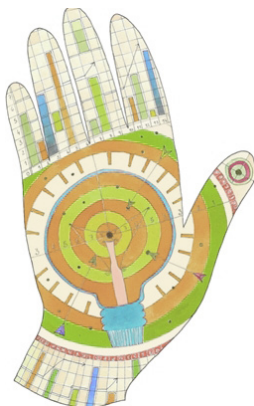
➕ Indicate the number of *planned vs completed* tasks on the status report.

➕ Use burn down charts, baseline views, integrated project analytics or earned value management to provide an objective view.

17% of large IT projects go so badly that **they can threaten the very existence of the company.**
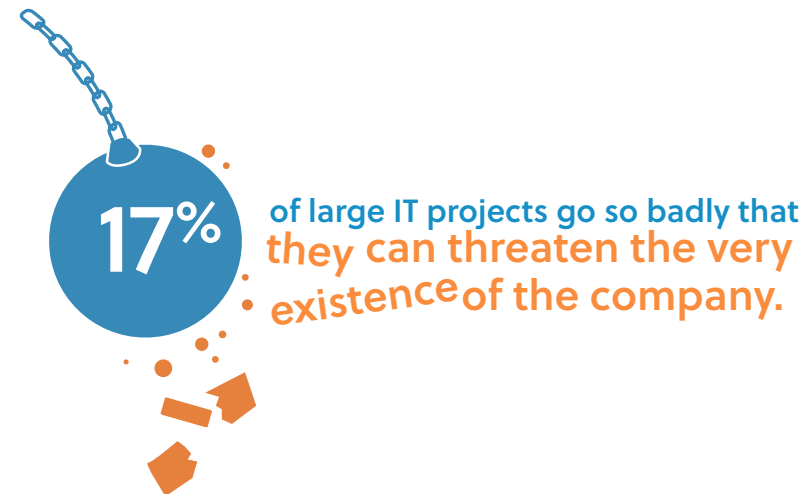
Takeaway and sources

The 5 habits in a nutshell

Habit #1: Be transparent

Builds trust, unites teams. Use collaborative, social PM software, communicate openly and often and have the courage to be a truth teller.

Habit #2: Be a vigilant collaborator

Collaboration leads to better ideas and quicker solutions. Ask questions, clarify goals, and nurture and promote an interactive culture for the team.

Habit #3: Make ranged estimates

Two-point estimations are easier to make, more realistic and trustworthy. Make high and low estimates based on best/worst case scenarios and ask for feedback from the team's collective experience.

Habit #4: Embrace uncertainty and adapt to change

Flexibility promotes risk management, proactive responses and better customer service. Use agile PM styles, make ranged estimates and identify risks early on.

Habit #5: Use data to make decisions

Data separates fact from fiction, gets buy-in from stakeholders and manages emotional reactions. Add schedule and financial metrics to status reports; use burn down charts and baseline views to tell an objective story.

Sources

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