

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINT – MARCH 2010

### Top Ten Skills for Project Managers

*By Lisa MacLean*

**1) If you're going to put the fox in charge of the henhouse, plan on losing some chickens.** If the project manager (PM) is seeing the project only as a means of showcasing themselves and their talents, or a way to bring negative and/or false information regarding coworkers to management, you can lose your best people. This can work as a way to make the messenger look superior, make other team members look bad or to shift blame. It will anger the better workers and send the poorer ones scurrying for their resumes coming out of the shared laser printer. Both reactions suction energy from the project.

If a project starts missing deadlines and people are backbiting and finger pointing, the Fox is on the job. People start to leave. Job quality falls but it's everyone's fault but the Project Manager, who praises you to your face but trashes you to higher-ups, which you discover at evaluation time.

**2) A good Project Manager is respectful to everyone, not just the "important" people.** There are many unsung heroes of the information age. The data entry people have tedious jobs, yet are your first line of defense when it comes to keeping data clean. The person who cleans your work area so that you can have a nicer space deserves the same courtesy and respect as the supervisor who comes by and interprets your uncluttered desk as a sign of an organized mind. Anyone wearing a name tag should be greeted by their name.

An effective project manager knows to make everyone feel important to the project and that they have a stake in its success. This kind of Project Manager gets projects done, and generates good will for the next project. A good measure of this is that other project members are speaking positively about that PM.

**3) A good PM gives credit where credit is due, and does it publicly.** I often will send an email to someone who has helped me, thanking them and being specific about what they did. I send a copy to their supervisor. If I don't email, I may use a memo or bring it up at a meeting where that person is present. It's just the right thing to do.

If a supervisor finds these in his mailbox, everyone will know.

**4) Good PMs don't raise a problem without having several possible solutions to it.** Present the problem in such a way that no one is blamed. So frame it in the nicest way possible—"The project is getting behind on [fill in the problem here]. I'd

like to present some alternatives and see if any of them will help get this back on track.” If the team has other suggestions, listen with an open mind and generate consensus.

I never approached management or team members with a problem without laying it out in a neutral fashion, and proposing solutions. The measure of the effectiveness of this is that my projects always moved forward and were completed, often after other analysts had been given the project. Another good way to measure this is that you don’t have to go to management often—problems get solved within the team.

**5) A good Project Manager should have a copy of the most recent organizational chart, and refer to it.** You may be about to cross over into someone else’s territory or data. If the marketing people want access to the sales division’s data, it’s best to know who the decision maker is for the group and approach them. The organizational chart will also keep you from going over someone’s head inadvertently. It’s often comfortable to ask someone that you know in the area simply because you’ve worked with that person before, but you may be “undermining” someone’s power base or overstepping your bounds, or worse, obtaining data from someone who was not in a position to deliver it. This one I have personally been bit by once and won’t do again.

A good measure of this is that other organizational divisions are brought into projects with minimal fanfare or disruption, but efficiency increases (less data entry, fewer input errors, more time to do more important functions).

**6) A good Project Manager nips trouble in the bud.** I have noticed that there is always one person assigned to a project whose role is (seemingly) to prevent the project from being completed (or sometimes even worked on). Fortunately, this person will identify themselves in the first group meeting. This person must not be allowed to monopolize project meetings, interject unrelated problems or topics, or hoard information. It’s best to communicate with this person via respectfully-worded emails (with a saved copy) with clear and concise issues or deadlines.

I dealt with a person who was the only person on the team that knew how to do his job. He intimidated his coworkers, refused to answer questions by asking his own, usually unrelated questions, or talking of his son’s vast success in my field. He kept insisting that data on a network was less secure than the data on his machine (in a room with multiple personnel access and not even a screen saver password). As someone with responsibility but no authority, I approached his supervisor who just smiled and shrugged and said, “Yeah, that’s John, what can I do?”

I broke the group down into smaller groups and “forgot” to include “John” in any of the new project teams. The smaller groups worked well, John answered his emails in

lofty and lengthy grandeur, and a project that had been stalled for over a year approached completion.

**7) A successful PM doesn't stay on the sidelines.** If a project manager doesn't appear to work, resentment is generated. A good PM isn't afraid to get to know everyone's job function within the team and get their hands dirty. When the team is working late, the PM should be right there, offering guidance, running interference amongst workers, and setting up good communication.

The measure of this is that projects aren't stalled, no one is complaining about the PM to upper management, and the "we're all in this together attitude" generates cooperation with management timelines.

**8) The effective PM makes reasonable estimates and learns through flexibility when to push and when to support.** If a PM has an unrealistic view of how long work should take, it's usually because they have never done it. If they allocate too little time, employees are bitter and uncooperative. If the estimates allocate too much time, people may slack off or the project will not be as cost-effective.

Sometimes people will slack off anyway, or get overwhelmed. If someone needs support, such as extra training, a part-time assistant, or relaxed deadlines due to extenuating circumstances, the PM helps out in the manner needed. If people are slacking off deliberately, they should not support but motivate (through whatever motivates them). If projects done by a particular manager are repeatedly brought in near budget and schedule, a competent person is in that position.

**9) The Good PM makes it clear to each person what their role is, what their responsibilities are, and what their deadlines are.** The worst project manager that I ever experienced had little experience himself. He put nothing in writing, gave only broad descriptions of job duties, and expected people not to interfere with anyone else's work (especially his own). Since no one really knew what they were supposed to be doing, some did nothing out of fear and confusion, and were castigated for laziness; those who clashed with others because of project role ambiguity were not "team players," and those who just tried to plow ahead and get the work done were cut down viciously for "thinking they ran the place." Of course, since nothing was in writing, none of us had any defense.

The measure of this type of project manager is chaos, projects that sail over budgets without restraint, work that takes many times longer than it should have, and high employee turnover.

**10) A good PM keeps their own training up.** All PMs should have the latest software and training. I think that a course at least once a year in new tools or

concepts should be taken. This is easily measured by requesting proof of the coursework and course grade.

**Conclusion:** A good Project Manager is the backbone of a project. Good ones are also hard to find. They are able to harness various skill sets, generate cooperation among different levels of skills and responsibilities, and bring projects to completion consistently and positively. These ten guidelines can help identify the best.

### About the Author:



### ***Lisa MacLean***

*Author*



**Lisa MacLean** is Assistant Professor of Computer Science and Systems at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. She worked in industry doing programming, systems analysis and design, and network and database administration for over a decade before taking her faculty appointment at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, Massachusetts. She is a graduate of Rhode Island College and Bentley University. Lisa can be contacted at [macleanl@wit.edu](mailto:macleanl@wit.edu).