

Project Managers are being asked to do more than ever before and, in today's economy, with less! They need an EXTREME Project Manager Makeover! Learn simple, but powerful, techniques for engaging teams and go from so-so performance to project success!

EXTREME Project Manager Makeover!

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**EXTREME  
Project Manager  
Makeover!**

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**Pattie Vargas**

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## From the Author: Why Extreme Project Managers?

It was bound to happen.

First there was ***Extreme Makeover – the Body Edition***. The producers of the show searched for perfectly normal, average looking people and convinced them they would be happier, sexier, richer and produce brighter children if they only *looked* a little better. So they whittled away a little here, added a little (or a lot!) there, plumped up, slimmed down, colored, cut and styled, producing a group of contestants who looked *nothing* like they did at the start of the program! Then they chose a winner based on some arbitrary measurement process. Usually the winner, in their newly reincarnated form, was someone none of us would want to be caught *dead* with for fear of looking really bad! Then someone might say to us, “Hey, there’s this TV show you should really look into ...”

Next came ***Extreme Makeover, the Home Edition***. A better premise – at least there was a needy family who would benefit from the home improvements performed by the Design Team, a group of young people with more heart than taste, as evidenced by some of the resulting rooms ... ok, I really do *love* this TV show and it is guaranteed to be a 3-hanky night whenever I watch. But come on, sometimes it does go a bit over the top ... a bedroom designed like a tree house, complete with swinging vines? I spent most of my time trying to *keep* the kids from jumping off the furniture, not *encouraging* it!

In keeping with the Extreme theme, in the technology industry we embarked on what was called ***Extreme Programming***. Software engineers used to spend

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endless hours in analysis and design, gathering requirements from their customers, writing design specifications and building prototypes before ever actually creating the final product. It took a lot of time, but it usually (I say usually!) guaranteed the finished deliverable was pretty close to what the customer ordered. In an effort to speed things up, we just took out all the analysis and documentation and got right to programming. The final result was delivered much quicker but introduced a new competency requirement – that of convincing the customer that what you *built* is really what they *wanted* all along. (I know you wanted a toaster but look how cool this go-cart is!)

So is it any wonder that all of these *extreme* changes required that those managing them should go *extreme*, as well? And yet, while the world was morphing at the speed of light, many of us in the project management profession continued with business as usual; maintaining our GANTT charts, managing scope, crying over decreased budgets and disappearing sponsors ... busier than we'd ever been. And just as predictably, project success seemed to always be just outside our reach. Even when we managed to meet a majority of the deliverables and close the project out close to on time and nearly within budget, we knew there was one success criteria we hadn't achieved – and that involved *the team*. Too often we found we put the interpersonal relationships on a back burner in favor of other priorities. After all, satisfying the customer and our sponsor was the most important thing, right? ***Absolutely!***

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But was it possible that:

- we could have actually performed *better*?
- the *quality* of our deliverable could have been improved?
- we missed opportunities to discover a *more creative and effective approach* to the solution?
- You, as the project manager, could have been more *influential and effective*?
- we might have finished the project and still *liked one another* rather than counting the days until this ordeal was over????

The time has come – we need an ***Extreme Project Manager Makeover!***

It isn't going to hurt, nothing will get cut off, glued on, and the final result will come closer to what the customer ordered than ever before. And you just might find you start enjoying your job a little more ... I can guarantee that *those you lead* will!





## Chapter One: Why Now?

### It's a New Job with New Job Requirements!

Project Managers are being called upon to do more than ever before – and often, in today's economy, with less! Consider this actual job posting from a well-known job board:

#### **Wanted: Project Manager**

##### **Minimum Requirements:**

- Manage, lead and motivate highly skilled project teams
- Motivate a varied, cross-functional staff
- Lead and promote change, growth and effectiveness
- Forge collaborative relationships among cross-functional teams

##### **Must possess:**

- Proven leadership of technical and non-technical teams
- Exceptional collaborative, teaming and consensus building abilities
- Proficiency in staff motivation, conflict resolution and disciplinary procedures
- Experience in staff management, recruitment and selection, creation of goals and objectives, performance assessment

Notice some very interesting things about this posting. *Nowhere does it say anything about technical project management skills.* It doesn't mention certifications or credentials. It doesn't specify the project tracking software that is used. Why? Because the company that posted this

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position assumes those are a given – if you are an experienced project manager, you should possess those skills already. They will be able to discern this from your resume.

But clearly, what this company has discovered – and probably after much pain – they need an **Extreme** Project Manager! The EPM realizes that his or her technical prowess will only take them so far. How many times is the word *motivate* used in the description above? I don't know about you, but I've never been particularly *motivated* by someone's resume. Impressed maybe, but motivated...naaah. Your credentials or experience may initially lend some credibility but *your actions* can just as easily destroy it.

How about the word *collaborative* – that's mentioned twice! Collaboration requires that we bring diverse workgroups together and facilitate effective partnerships. Before we are able to collaborate on something, we have to share a mutual goal and display a similar commitment to reaching that goal. How do we go about that?

Finally, notice that the Project Manager this organization is looking for is a leader. And not just a *project* leader, a *people* leader.

Clearly, Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore.

### **It's a New Workplace!**

In case you've been asleep for the last decade, the workplace itself has undergone quite the metamorphosis. It *looks* different in terms of gender, culture, ethnicity and

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generational variables. To a lesser extent, it *acts* different as organizations react to the changing demographics. Be patient, it takes time to turn a behemoth around. And structurally, the workplace is adapting in order to compete more effectively. Let's begin by examining some of those different structures.

#### **Organizational Structure 101**

My graduate degree is in Organizational Management so this is a subject I have studied and written about extensively. But when they handed out our textbooks and they looked strangely like an *Etch-A-Sketch*, I should have had a clue. It seemed that just as quickly as we identified a structure, it either disappeared, reinvented itself or some new and improved one took its place! This gave new meaning to the term "*...seemed like a good idea at the time...*"

For the sake of brevity, let's stick with the tried and true – call them whatever new buzzword you like:

#### ***The Functional Organization***

This structure has been the standard for most organizations for centuries. It looks like a pyramid with all the little people placed somewhere in that pyramid depending on who they report to. This is referred to as *hierarchy*. The closer you get to the top, the fewer people there are, the fancier the title, the more slippery the slope and the thinner the air. Project Managers who work in this organization have been well schooled to understand that they have very little authority, even less power and have to fight it out with functional managers to have resources assigned to the project. Some companies have gone so

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far as to install mud-wrestling pits in their parking lot just to even out the odds. (Ok, I made that part up, but maybe it's not such a bad idea - it might have actually improved my chances!)

### ***The Matrix Organization***

This is an interesting one. Many organizations claim to have a Matrix structure but it is curious that Matrix is broken down into two types: *Weak Matrix* and *Strong Matrix*. Everyone will claim theirs is a Strong Matrix. After all, who wants to be viewed as a weakling? But the proof is in the mud-wrestling pit. The premise in a Strong Matrix is that cross-functional resources are pulled from departments across the organization and assigned to projects that are critical to achieving strategic company goals. The Project Manager over these important projects wields an immense amount of power and authority over those resources. However, strategic plans tend to get lost in the day-to-day crises and the Strong Matrix can turn into a Weak Matrix with one phone call from the Vice-President of Squeaky Wheels. Just like that, the functional manager reclaims his resource and the hapless Project Manager is left with a schedule that didn't change, a list of deliverables that actually grew and fewer people with which to do it!

### ***The Projectized Organization***

Now, I've heard of this phenomenon. It ranks up there with the Loch Ness Monster – I know it exists somewhere but I've never actually seen it. The PMBOK® Guide (*A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*) defines the Projectized Organization as: *Any organizational structure in which the project manager has*

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*full authority to assign priorities, apply resources, and direct the work of persons assigned to the project.* Sounds like the Strong Matrix but obviously giving it a new name puts a little meat on the bones. To take the concept further, resources are often co-located, but it isn't necessary. One so-called projectized structure that I worked in had two team members in Europe, with the rest of us in the States. I made a strong case for co-locating all of us to Belgium but no one went for it. So much for their commitment to being Projectized. Geez – go figure.

All kidding aside, this would be a great model to work within. All of the resources are allocated as needed to accomplish the goals of the project. When one project completes, they go back into the pool ready for the next assignment. The company has systems in place that track costs and resources efficiently and the Project Manager has both the authority and responsibility to manage all parts of the project. In this type of structure the need for being an Extreme Project Manager becomes even greater! After all, if you have all this power and authority, you have little excuse - it stands to reason you should be able to deliver. And in the window of time allotted to that project, you need to get those plug-and-play resources *on your side fast!*

Regardless of the organizational structure, it is highly likely that your project will consist of cross-functional resources. In chapter three, we will discuss how to build influence and extract peak performance from individuals who do not report directly to you. When faced with conflicting priorities, your project success depends on ensuring that your deliverables have as high a weight in

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their minds as those assigned by their immediate supervisor.

### **The Workplace Goulash**

My mom used to make a meal called goulash. Not Hungarian Goulash – just goulash. What it really meant was “The day before grocery day was time to clean-out all the leftovers.” She mixed it all together and, amazingly, it tasted really good. The result was actually greater than the sum of the parts!

So it is in our multi-cultural, multi-generational, multi-ethnic workplace. The more diverse, the better the ideas. New perspectives. Greater imagination. Provided, of course, that the project manager doesn't apply a one-size-fits-all management style to those on the team and expect *them* to adjust to *you*. **What?** But I'm the Project Manager! You just said I'm a workplace leader! Exactly, Weed-hopper. To be a great leader requires that you have someone to lead. And the best way to lose your audience is to treat them as a blob instead of as individuals. We'll get to more of that later.

Let's consider just the *generational* diversity among our teams, as evidenced by a recent Workplace Study:

- Young boomers – those born at the tail end of the baby boom – held an average of 10.2 jobs between the ages of 18 and 38. And those jobs were not necessarily within the same company, as an expected result of upward movement. Not only did they switch companies, they changed careers, looking for more interesting opportunities! The *work*

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they do and *who they do it with* had a big impact on those decisions.

- Less than 28% of the workplace today is made up of those between the ages of 30-40 years old. Many of them have instead elected to start and run their own companies, exercising more control over what they work on.
- Many retirees are re-entering the workplace as they find themselves sandwiched between the care of elder parents and the support of adult children and the ensuing financial responsibilities of it all.
- Gen X, Y have grown up in the era of corporate and political misbehavior. They are less likely to respect you simply because you are in charge – you'll have to *earn* their respect and loyalty.

The recognition that we need a “work/life balance” has become widespread and many people are actually beginning to believe it. This can spell disaster for an unrealistic schedule! This was brought home to me one day while talking to my oldest son, Steve. He casually informed me that he and “some of the guys” were going snowboarding the next day. I was aghast! The conversation went something like this:

*Self-righteous me: “You can’t go snowboarding tomorrow!”*

*Steve, the puzzled young worker: “Why?”*

*Me: “Because it’s a Wednesday! You can’t go snowboarding on a Wednesday!”*

*Steve, the enlightened, young worker, looking at me with pity: “I have tons of vacation hours on the books. We’re going snowboarding!”*

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This mindset is having a contagious effect on *all* of the generations as we scratch our heads and ask, “Huh – I guess he’s right. Why don’t *I* start using some of those vacation hours I keep losing every year???”

How about the retention issue? According to Marcus Buckingham, leading expert on employee retention and productivity, the single greatest reason for leaving, cited on employee exit surveys, is a poor relationship with the immediate manager or supervisor. And before you tell yourself this isn’t that big of a deal consider these statistics from Nancy Ahlrichs, human resources consultant and author:

- 67% of all employees are looking for a job on some level; 56% actively plan to change employers within the next 3 years.
- 1 in 11 technology employees left their organizations in 2004 – up 30% from 2003.
- 75% of *top* employees feel confident in their ability to easily find another job.

Can your project afford a revolving door like that?

### **Communication, Anyone?**

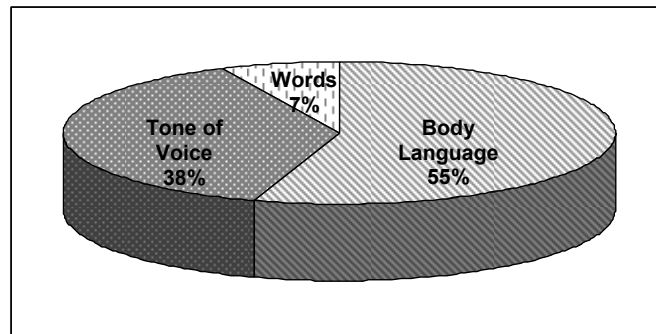
Call them soft skills, people skills, whatever – I prefer to call them *Relational Skills*. As the configurations of our projects continue to change and the less control we have over the makeup of the teams, the more important these relational skills become. In fact, investment in the development of those skills is a *practical business decision with a tremendous ROI*. Let’s look at communication modalities, for example. Experts tell us that our message is communicated in three ways: our



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body language, the tone of our voice, and the words that we use.

The pie chart below demonstrates the impact and weight of each:



Approximately **55%** of our message is communicated by our *body language*. If I am smiling when I tell you we're going to scrap our technology for something brand-spanking new and shiny just as we are entering the implementation phase, of course, you'll know I'm joking! But if you can't see my facial expression you might swallow that cyanide capsule before I can say, "Just kidding – gotcha!"

Approximately **38%** of our message is conveyed in the *tone of voice* we use (can you say *sarcasm??*). Just think of how you can change the meaning of the phrase "Good job!" simply by changing your voice inflection!

The remaining measly **7%** of our message relies on the *actual words we use*. For those of us who consider ourselves to be quite eloquent, this is a humbling statistic!

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So what's the relevance of communication modalities to managing people? It's simply one more data point to reinforce the premise that we need to be constantly evaluating the environment around us and then adjust accordingly. I personally prefer most of my communication to be done via email. It provides an audit trail and gives me a chance to evaluate a situation, prepare a response and manage the timing of my delivery. On the other hand, it also provides endless opportunities for misinterpretation and the never-ending chain of re: re: re: re: re: re: as we desperately try to clear up a misunderstanding that could have been avoided by HAVING A CONVERSATION!

In a workplace that has become increasingly diverse in terms of culture and ethnicity, the face-to-face interaction can alleviate a lot of miscommunication. In lieu of that, at least incorporating the spoken word can provide the additional interpretation of intent. If you are managing a project with a distributed work team, never rely solely on email as your mode of communication. If face-to-face meetings are not possible, conduct regular on-line meetings with teleconferencing, if not video conferencing, capabilities.

The bottom line is, it's not about how we as managers prefer to communicate. It's not about expecting our teams to adapt to our management style. It's about how we as *leaders* learn to flex and adapt to ensure the success of those we are leading. We need new tools to compete in the ever-changing workplace in order to produce quality deliverables. Consider the risk of saying the most *expensive* words in the English language: *We've always done it this way!*

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### **Reputational Risk**

One of my clients coined this term and I immediately swiped it. (Consultants are allowed – yea, encouraged – to do this. However, the rule does not apply once the stolen thought is included in that same consultant's *book*.) Project Managers are very familiar with risk – we devise complex, detailed risk assessments and contingencies to protect the integrity of the project. We consider risk in terms of resource availability, technologies chosen, budget and market conditions. All are very important to the client and to the project itself. But how about what matters to you as an individual? What about your reputation? Think of the risk to our credibility and careers if we allow a project to get away from us!

Benjamin Zander, conductor for the Boston Philharmonic orchestra, made an astounding discovery, many, many years into his career. The orchestra conductor is the only musician who *never sounds a note!* He depends on the skill and mastery of the musicians he leads for his power – for his reputation. True, it is his face on the record jackets and his name in lights on the theatre marquees. But if he can not extract from his orchestra their very best, if he is unable to persuade them to come together and deliver exquisite, top-quality musicianship, there goes his reputation.

What a wonderful metaphor for project management! I led individuals with diverse skill sets – software engineers, system and data analysts, database architects, network specialists. I possessed some (one or two, maybe) of those skills, but not all! If they were not delivering for one

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reason or another, I didn't have the option of jumping in and just doing it myself – I *needed* them to perform.

We can threaten, cajole, intimidate those we lead into performing, but that technique is not sustainable. Fear is only effective as a motivator for a season – the minute another opportunity presents itself, the oppressed will take it in a heartbeat. For the sake of our reputations as project managers, the sooner we develop more effective means of motivation and influence, the more successful we will be.

I learned early on that of all the moving parts of a project, there were really very few that I could control. Now, follow me here, and put your PMBOK® back on the shelf for just a minute: I had little control over the budget. I was often handed a budget to begin with only to have it slashed or appropriated or otherwise manipulated by those with lengthier titles than mine.

I had limited power over the project scope. I've heard many project managers brag about their ability to manage scope. Yet when faced with pressure from the VP of Squeaky Wheels that I alluded to earlier, they cave in with the best of us. It is simply the nature of project management. (Ok, as a nod to all those project management best practices that I completely agree with, you can include these things in the risk assessment – and I would encourage you to do so – and you can implement various change control processes, but ultimately change is going to occur and impact your ability to maintain *total* control. You can join a support group for control freaks to deal with this painful truth.)

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But what I *could* control was how my team interacted with one another and with me. This was one area where I could wield a tremendous amount of influence and have a powerful impact on the successful outcome of the project. When a group of individuals finally becomes a team, the odds greatly increase in your favor. Creating a cohesive, gelled unit, working in community to achieve a common goal, is the surest guarantee of success that I've found!

So what do you want to be known for? What do you want your reputation to be as a project manager? Do you measure your success by timeliness? That is one factor certainly. But you could come in on time because you skipped tasks 7, 24, 32 and 56. Within budget? Another success factor, true, but also one that doesn't tell the whole story. I've come in under budget many times but they never gave *me* any of the money I saved so whoop-

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de-doo. Where does quality figure in as a success factor? If I had a choice, I would sacrifice budget and schedule for higher quality, but we all know that something in that triple constraint usually has to give.

Here's how I measured success in my projects:

- On time – meaning whatever deadline I negotiated with my customers and sponsors by keeping them in the loop and well apprised of any issues.
- Within budget – you usually can't go back for more so this one is important to manage well.
- Happy customers and sponsors – which spoke to the **quality** of what I delivered.
- Team members who are proud of their product, committed to the project and **ready to work for me again.**

That last one was the most important to me. If I nailed that one, I had already ensured the other three.

You see, my dear project manager, you can't do it alone. As Barbra Streisand sang decades ago ... "people who need people are the luckiest people in the world!"

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