

The Ten Practices and Habits of Highly Successful Project Managers

AN UNCOMMON VIEW OF SUCCESSFUL PROJECT MANAGERS

BY: JOHN SIMONDS, MARTIN SIMONDS ASSOCIATES, JANUARY 1, 1999

Truly successful project managers are as rare nowadays as a successful Russian banker. We are talking about that rare project manager who consistently brings jobs in on-time, on-budget, to the complete satisfaction of the client.

In our continuing effort to serve the A/E industry with fresh ideas, we decided to study this rare and endangered species called “*The Truly Successful Project Manager*” in order to understand what it is that they do that allows them to be successful. The result of our research into this important arena we are calling: *The Ten Practices and Habits of Highly Successful Project Managers*.

1. Focus On Communication

The first thing we learned about successful project managers is their recognition of the fact that when things go wrong on a project, over seventy-five percent of the time the cause can be traced to a breakdown in communication or interpersonal relations. Compared with the average project manager, the winners devote almost fifty percent more time to communication and building relationships. Rather than see-

ing time spent “bonding” with clients and the project staff as wasted time, they view this time as a problem prevention activity. Clear, consistent communication to all the “stakeholders” to the project is their mantra.

2. Commit To Project Planning

The second thing we learned is that successful project managers have a powerful allegiance to project planning. Like the old saying about not serving wine before its time, the successful project manager will not start the technical work until the project has been thoroughly planned. They are staunch believers that if they spend the time up-front in anticipating problems, understanding the client’s needs and expectations, and programming the project in detail, they

"The problem here is a failure to communicate"

— COOL HAND LUKE

will avoid time-consuming fire-fighting when the project gets underway.

3. Avoid Over Optimism

The third thing we learned is that successful project managers avoid over optimism in scoping the job. They ask the question, what are the things that can go wrong on this project and what can I do to prevent or mitigate the problems that are most likely to occur. Unlike the average project manager, they have no hesitation about asking the “wiser heads” in their firms to review their plan for fatal flaws. The successful project manager takes the advice of Andrew Grove, the highly respected CEO of Intel, by staying just a bit “paranoid”. Being overly optimistic at the scoping stage is one of the chief causes of project breakdowns; successful project managers understand this far better than most.

4. Be a Good Psychologist

The fourth thing we learned about successful project managers is that they are good psychologists. They manifest an uncharacteristic ability to read

people far better than the average project manager because they have trained themselves to appreciate the nuances of human behavior. They do not take people at face value, but rather look for subtle clues that reveal the true character of clients, staff, contractors and the other stakeholders who will impact their project. As good psychologists, they have mastered the art and science of “active listening” as the primary tool for learning what others want and need.

5. Confront and Manage Conflict

The fifth characteristic that distinguishes successful project managers is their willingness to confront conflict early. While the average project manager tends to be conflict-averse, the successful ones readily accept the fact that conflicts on complex projects comes with the territory; they are inevitable. Rather than sweep differences under the rug, they tenaciously pursue the early resolution of conflicts using win/win strategies. They do not allow personality or communication problems to fester. They go after the problem with the tenacity of a terrier, but the finesse of a diplomat.

This willingness to confront conflict early is a chief reason why they consistently have fewer change orders, fewer budget overruns and fewer dissatisfied clients than the average project manager.

6. Extraordinary Responsiveness

The sixth practice of successful project managers is extraordinary responsiveness to the client’s stated and unstated needs and wants. They understand and accept the client’s need to be comfortable with the project, twenty-four hours a day, every day.

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They appreciate that the client does not want any surprises, and they make it their business to ensure that the client can access them anytime, anywhere, night or day. They return telephone calls promptly and they make certain that everyone on the project is committed and dedicated to the same level of service.

7. Provide Alternatives to Client

The seventh practice that sets the successful project managers apart is a willingness to provide the client with

alternatives without pressing his/her pet solution on a cautious client. Rather than being a “solution looking for a problem”, the successful project manager shows respect for the client’s intelligence by offering alternatives, with an explanation of the advantages and disadvantages of each. According to the client’s we interviewed, this is one of the most important yet least practiced characteristic of the ideal project manager.

8. Significant Documentation

The eighth habit of successful project managers is to document significant conversations in order to avoid communication breakdowns. Successful project managers appreciate the fact that their clients and staff are very susceptible to selective hearing. They recognize that we all have elaborate filters that screen out information that threatens our preconceived ideas. To avoid the negative consequences that arise from common listening problems, the successful project managers document, in writing, significant conversations, whether from meetings or one-on-one sessions. This written documentation is then sent to all the parties to the conversation with a request for corrections or modifications if the recipient heard a different message.

9. Bond With Clients

The ninth practice of successful project managers is that they work hard at earn-

ing the trust and friendship of the client starting with the first contact.

As Alan Greenspan recently said, “human nature is immutable”. Successful project managers want to know their clients as human beings with hopes, dreams and fears. Instead of viewing the client as a sick patient in need of help, they see him or her as a partner. At first blush this may seem overly simplistic until you listen to average project managers who often view the client as an adversary. In one poll we took, younger project managers reported that they wanted an impersonal, “professional relationship” with clients, one devoid of emotion. This is diametrically opposite to what most clients report they want from a project manager. Most clients desire to work with a project manager who has empathy and warmth for them as human beings.

10. Special Leadership

The tenth practice of successful project managers is leadership of a special kind. Successful project managers inspire trust and confidence in others including contractors, clients, staff and all the other stakeholders to the project. They understand the special requirements for leading professionals. General Patton they are not. Yet they manifest the same willingness to take decisive action when the situation demands it, but without being autocratic or dogmatic. They are tough-minded, yet willing to see the

other person’s point of view and accommodate the needs of the other members of the team when doing so will not compromise the integrity of the project. They take a genuine interest in people and they manifest this with nonjudgmental and empathic listening, and they show unswerving respect for the dignity of each member of the project team.

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Conclusion

While these ten practices and habits of successful project managers are important, if not critical, we do not purport that our enumeration is exhaustive. It does, however, point up the need to take a fresh look at how project managers are selected and trained.

In our review of other project management training programs, we, and some of our clients, are dismayed at the lack of adequate attention to the significant role communication and interpersonal

skills play in the success of a project. Even the Project Management Institute relegates these topics to a very secondary place in its basic four-day training program. Could it be because the technical people that design and deliver these programs lack a sophisticated understanding of human behavior as it applies to project management, or is it that they fail to appreciate its importance in the success equation? Whatever the reason, we believe that it is time to redesign the approach to project management training and development in which the client’s needs and expectations are put in the alpha position. If you ask the clients to design the ideal curriculum, we are certain that communication and interpersonal relations will occupy a dominant role. Our conviction of this fact is strong enough that we have titled our own program, Client-Focused Project Management.

This title is emblematic of a new era in project management; one that recognizes rising client expectations in an ever more complex world. While the basics of planning, scheduling, budgeting and controlling projects remains essential, the basics are no longer enough to ensure success.

Every published study of what clients want and expect of project managers points up the need for improved communication and interpersonal relations. It is time for the A/E industry to respond.



*For more information about Martin-Simonds Associates
Project Management Program:*

(800) 543-6524

PO Box 35818, Albuquerque, NM 87176, USA

Fax (505) 293-2112

www.martin-simonds.com