



PROJECT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Help Build Adaptability

BY ANTONIO NIETO-RODRIGUEZ

**In this decade, the world will see more change
and projects than ever.**

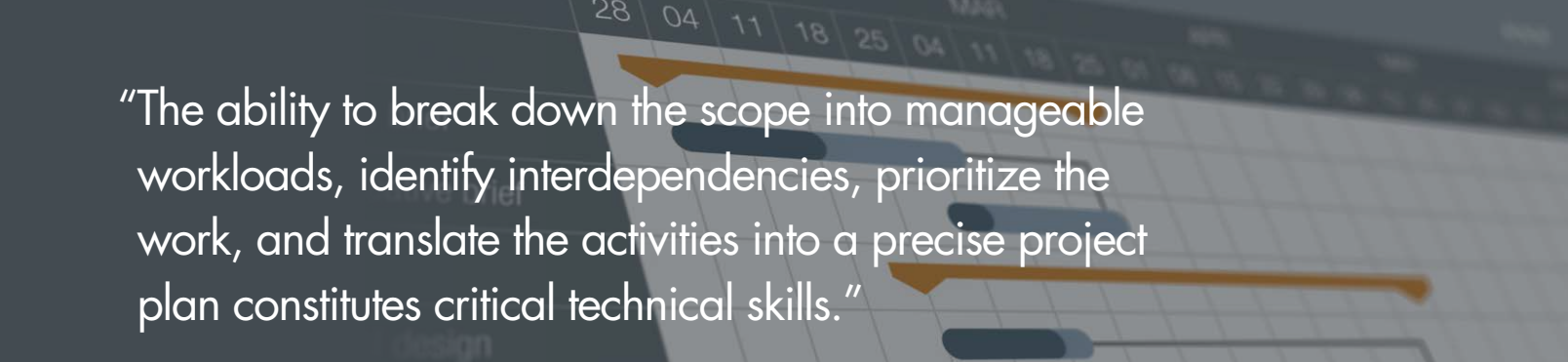
The trillions of funds that have been promised for the pandemic recovery mean that there are millions of projects that will require millions of project managers.

A McKinsey survey from May 2020 on the most critical skills organizations need to develop post-COVID-19 highlighted that, for the first time ever, project management was one of the top three.

Yet, despite this outlook, the appalling project failure rates, around 60% to 70%, require us to refresh and redesign the project and change management methods that we use. In fact, the methods we use today were designed for a world where operations were the primary focus and projects were a small fraction of an organization's activities.

In the "Project Economy," as I define it, project-based work becomes the primary unit of work, while operations need less and fewer resources to be carried out. The good news is that project-based work develops your adaptability and resilience. And that is why demand is increasing extraordinarily fast for people who can effectively lead projects.

A quick search on LinkedIn makes it clear just how many job descriptions require sound project management skills and experience. I can totally relate to this, as in two of my previous companies, one of the major skill gaps identified was people capable of leading projects across the organization. While many of us pick up some of these skills by intuition and practice, the reality is that developing sound



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modern project management skills requires eagerness to learn, dedication, and focus.

Quite simply, great project leaders make their projects more successful. The most effective project manager is like a football coach or an orchestra conductor. As a true team player, this manager can gather a diverse group of people, each with unique expertise, and create a high-performing team out of the different individual talents. Each participant must have a clear role, feel that they are contributing to the purpose of the project, and be appreciated by the others.

A successful project leader is resilient against adversities and knows how and when to adapt. They will also seek diversity in the team composition and encourage and take advantage of diversity of thought.

I believe anyone can develop into a successful project leader. However, the responsibility requires focus, commitment, determination, personal awareness, eagerness to be a continuous learner, and perseverance during times of failure. As Pamela Gill-Alabaster, head of sustainability at Mattel, rightly said, “Continuous learning leads to continuous improvement. Commit yourself to advancing your knowledge, skills, and expertise. The business environment is quickly changing, and your understanding of the leading practices, thinking, and emerging tools will help you manage for better results. Be a lifelong student.”

QUALITIES TO THRIVE IN THE PROJECT ECONOMY

The main qualities needed to excel as a leader in the project-driven world can be grouped into five categories:

- Project management technical skills
- Product development and domain expertise
- Strategy and business acumen
- Leadership and change management skills
- Agility and adaptability

Let’s now explore each of these competencies in turn.

Project management technical skills. Effective project leaders use tools and techniques to determine the rationale and business case of a project. They should be able to work with key contributors and partners in defining scope accurately. The ability to break down the scope into manageable workloads, identify interdependencies, prioritize the work, and translate the activities into a comprehensive, well-defined, and

precise project plan constitutes critical technical skills.

These skills require a good understanding of details (analytical skills) and the overall picture (strategic skills), as well as the interdependencies and trade-offs between scope, time, and budget.

When delays or changes to the plan are foreseen, a good project leader analyzes the consequences and offers viable alternatives to the sponsor and steering committee.

Product development and domain expertise. Modern project leaders need to have product development skills and domain expertise to lead high-impact projects. They should be proficient in whatever offerings the project will generate: the technology (such as AI or Big Data), the features, the product, the service, or other capabilities.

These competencies give you credibility with the team and the stakeholders. They enable you to communicate in the language of the experts and the product teams, and they give you a good grasp of the project benefits and how and when they will be achieved. Your level of expertise should be overarching rather than detailed. It is not your job to decide on or do most of the work, but you need sufficient understanding to be able to challenge the teams.

Strategy and business acumen. A project leader should develop a good understanding of the organization, its strategy, its key competitors, and the environment in which the project will be implemented.

For example, if the project’s purpose is to increase access to education, an effective project leader will need to appreciate a range of educational systems—which systems are the most successful, why they succeed, and which alternatives best fit the specific needs of the project.

The ability to connect the project benefits and purpose to concrete business challenges and priorities is essential for project buy-in and success. Stakeholders, including senior management, will be more supportive if the project leader can make this connection. The most important capability in this category is a strong focus on the benefits and other impacts, even in the early stages. Value creation is a critical and sought-after element in the project-driven world.

Leadership and change management skills. The increased speed of change, greater complexity, overlapping priorities, culture of seeking consensus, multigenerational workforce—all these forces make the implementation of projects much

harder than in the past. Although pure managerial skills were largely sufficient for previous generations, today's project managers must develop strong leadership and sound change management capabilities.

They have to provide direction; communicate progress and changes; evaluate, develop, and engage staff; and motivate people even though the managers have no formal authority. They must also develop the skills to confront and challenge others effectively and respectfully. Diverse opinions and different ways of solving problems will lead to potential conflict throughout the life of the project, and misunderstandings will occur—these are a normal part of conducting projects.

The effective project leader should also be able to engage the project sponsor and obtain the support of senior leadership and the organization for the project. The ability to understand oneself and effectively sustain working relationships with others—in other words, emotional intelligence—is critical. Project leaders have to understand different cultures and how to get the best work from a variety of people; manage and persuade multiple stakeholders, including some who are against the project; build bridges across the organization (which will often be siloed and short on resources); create a high-performing team; and dedicate enough time to develop and coach team members.

Project leaders must make effective decisions and be proactive, disciplined, and results-driven. Finally, they must be resilient—able to bounce back from any difficulties and changes that life throws their way. Resilience is an invaluable leadership skill in projects.

Agility and adaptability. In today's world of constant flux, effective project managers need to feel comfortable working in uncertain situations, making plans and decisions with only limited information. When the initiative's requirements are not known in advance, there is much uncertainty about what the outcomes will look like or whether the requirements are likely to change throughout the lifecycle of the project. In these situations, the project manager should be prepared to apply some Agile methods (or adaptive techniques).

As organizations increasingly sought to become faster and more flexible, they recognized that the Agile principles used in software development could be applied much more broadly to organizations as a whole. Leaders focus on creating this Agile environment by encouraging everyone to contribute, facilitating joint problem solving, and encouraging all project team members to take accountability for individual and team outcomes.

Agile leadership is the craft of creating the right conditions for self-organization. Finding the balance between anarchy and an overly strict structure is crucial in today's markets. Developing and maintaining this environment is often hard work, requiring you to focus on the needs of others and promote an ownership

mindset, feedback, and long-term goals. In this environment, micromanagement takes a back seat to agile teams that collaborate, learn from each other continuously, get quick feedback from users, and focus on quality.

THE XTH FACTOR

Besides the five key competencies of project leadership, a good attitude is also essential. I label attitude the "xth competency" and not the sixth, because it has a multiplier effect on all the other competencies and the overall success of the project. Attitude is contagious. As the project manager or project sponsor, your attitude will strongly influence other people around you.

Attitudes are established ways of responding to people and situations—ways that we have learned from our beliefs, values, and assumptions. Attitudes manifest themselves through our behavior and help us persevere through the most challenging moments of the project. Attitude is sometimes more important than facts, the past, and education. A knowledgeable and experienced project manager without a positive attitude will often fail to deliver the project. When choosing a leader for a highly demanding project, organizations are better off with someone who is less experienced or lacks some competencies but who has a strong, positive attitude.

Maintaining a positive frame of mind requires effort. Even when times are difficult, as they often are with projects, look for the bright side of every situation. Spending time with optimistic people will help you stay positive. Expressing gratitude is another powerful way to keep a positive attitude. Show appreciation to your team members and their contributions. They will probably contribute even more to your current project and want to work with you on future projects.

I am convinced that anyone can develop these project management competencies and become more adaptive and resilient, but it requires commitment, determination, personal awareness, and the desire to learn. Good project leadership not only improves projects but also positively shapes organizational culture as well.

Are you ready for it? [AQ](#)

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez is a leading expert in project management and strategy implementation, creator of concepts such as the "Project Economy" and the "Hierarchy of Purpose." His work has been recognized by Thinkers50 with the prestigious award "Ideas into Practice." He is the author of the recently published Harvard Business Review Project Management Handbook, as well as Lead Successful Projects, The Project Revolution, and The Focused Organization. He has been teaching the value of project management to senior leaders for more than two decades at Duke CE, Instituto de Empresa, Solvay Business School, and Vlerick. Nieto-Rodriguez has held executive positions at PricewaterhouseCoopers, BNP Paribas, and GlaxoSmithKline. Former chairman of the Project Management Institute, he is the founder of Projects & Co and co-founder of the Strategy Implementation Institute. He is a member of Marshall Goldsmith 100 coaches.