

9 Habits of a High-Performing Project Manager¹

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Abstract

This paper is for project management (PM) professionals at all levels who want to improve the practice of PM in their organization by deploying better habits. A constantly changing project environment dictates the use of every possible tool, process, and habit. Inasmuch as these habits are neither revolutionary nor unique, when applied together they can positively influence the outcome of projects in a very significant way. Each habit's simplicity is powerful and easy for any project manager to adopt. High-performing project managers routinely deploy all 9 habits to achieve excellence in executing small or large projects worldwide.

Introduction

What is a habit? Simply put, a habit is a behavior pattern that is regularly followed. In his book, “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” Stephen Covey defines a habit as the intersection of three dimensions: knowledge (what to do and the why), skill (how to do), and desire (want to do). Transforming a behavior into a routine habit requires conscious effort in all three dimensions: our recognition of the need and associated reward, an understanding of how to exhibit the behavior, and most importantly the willingness to change. The knowledge, skill, and desire are typically acquired and developed through experience and shaped by our own sense of ethics, values, professionalism, style, responsibility, and fairness.

While Stephen Covey’s habits are universally applicable across all professions, we have chosen in this paper to identify habits that are specifically tailored to the field of PM. In today’s PM environment just using the PM tools and processes correctly sometimes does not cut it. Employing tools does not necessarily achieve all of the project or organization’s goals. Real improvements come from positive changes in how people work and interact. Therefore, even the smallest habit can reap big benefits in the quality of our daily work and lead us on the path to achieving our professional and project goals.

Methodology

Much is written about a project manager’s technical competencies and people skills; however, there is almost nothing available specifically on a project manager’s habits and/or traits backed by some research and data.

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Over the last 10 years, the authors leveraged their own experiences on various projects listed in Appendix A to interview more than 25 project directors/managers between the ages of 45 and 65, representing at least 12 different countries/cultures. When interviewed, these project managers on average had 25 years of industry experience, hence, representing a total of 625 years of overall PM experience. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing the project managers to draw from their own experiences within project management. From the interviews, we developed a list of dozen critical habits. We then surveyed an additional 25 project managers, asking them to rank the list of dozen habits based on two criteria, ease of adoption and potential impact on the project environment. The survey also provided project managers the opportunity to add one or more habits not already captured in the list. We analyzed the survey results and selected and consolidated our findings into 9 high-performing habits. Finally, we reorganized the 9 based on similar themes and alignment to Project Management Institute (PMI) principles and best practices.

The 9 Habits

HABIT ONE: Take complete ownership of the project

Once a project is authorized it is important for the project manager to assume full control of the project from day one. It is typical for the customer or sponsor or business development managers to get involved with project execution and the project manager is not afforded the opportunity to formulate his or her own vision and strategy. Do not let this happen as it will cause confusion and leadership crises. In fact, through guidance and direction, the project manager should help the team attain a sense of project ownership. It is a highly motivational force.

On one global project, the business development (BD) manager instead of the project manager kept directing the project team. The BD manager's priorities were sales-oriented and thus lead the team in a different direction. Team members did not know whose direction to follow. The project manager came across as a weak person unable to make decisions. Finally when the BD manager left the project, it took several weeks for the project manager to exert his influence.

On another Digital Technology project, the consulting project manager who helped stand up the program and supported the project for 2 years left. Both the client and project team highly valued and trusted her opinions. As the incoming project manager was onboarding to the project, he allowed the deputy project manager who had been on the project for a year to assume temporary control. For almost a month, the project manager took a backseat in key discussions and decisions. By the time the project manager was ready to take back ownership, the client and project team had already become accustomed to turning to the deputy project manager for leadership and direction. As the project manager tried to introduce a new vision for the program, there was much confusion and miscommunication, and essentially zero buy-in. As a result, the project manager had a very hard time in getting his project team to see him as a trusted leader and not just a manager.

HABIT TWO: Enable core team to make decisions

Building a high performance team without trust is tough. The first and foremost task of the project manager is to get the right resources assigned to his or her project by negotiating with functional heads. This takes great interpersonal skills. Gathering the right core team to execute the project is the most critical task. Next step is to ensure that the team gels. Change players as necessary, and get rid of non-players early on. Carrying key people on your team that you have no confidence in can jeopardize project success.

Once the team is assembled, it is important for the project manager to enable each player with responsibilities and the authority to make progress most efficiently. Empower them with decision making, thereby streamlining the approval cycle. Delegate as much as possible otherwise you will end up working a double shift. Give prompt credit where it belongs. Make sure not to take all the credit yourself. Remember that trust goes both ways. The #1 driver of a project manager's ability to influence is trust.

On one Advanced Technology project, the project manager did not have much faith in the engineering manager and tried to bypass him on key decisions. This had a huge impact on the schedule and quality of deliverables. The project manager's role is to approve decisions taken by SMEs (Subject Matter Experts), not necessarily to make decisions himself. Another important sub-habit under this habit is for the project manager to not accept incomplete work from core team members. It is important for the project manager to always insist on accurate and completed work.

HABIT THREE: Finish meetings with an “action items list”

Before concluding a project meeting, ensure that an ‘action items list’ is developed to be included with the meeting minutes. A well-written action item contains enough information to spur you into action rather than just serving as an anchor for you to then remember what needs to be done. Good rules of thumb in capturing each action item are to:

- Provide context and enough detail such that even a team member who was not in attendance can easily understand the action item
- Assign ownership by name or as a minimum by department, particularly in large team environments
- Include a due date.

The action items list should be a living document until all items have been closed. Each subsequent project meeting should begin with reviewing the list to determine which items have been completed and capture progress against the ones that are still outstanding.

Additionally, starting meetings on time is a critical sub-habit. In many cultures this is not respected. Participants routinely barge in the meeting 10-15 minutes late. A highly effective project manager ensures that the “late” culture is not tolerated by setting a precedent and coming to meetings on time.

On one large Power project, the project manager scheduled several planning meetings with no Action Items List resulting in a lot of wasted time in each meeting as no one would take responsibility of what was agreed upon in the previous meeting. This had a significant adverse impact on the schedule of engineering deliverables.

HABIT FOUR: Plan from finish to start

Think of what you want your customer to say at completion of the project. Repeat that exercise with your management, your employees, and the end user in mind. Then work backwards to achieve that outcome. Finish to Start planning involves work breakdown, sequencing, scheduling, and budgeting. It also considers contractual and profitability requirements.

Planning is the most critical process. The project manager needs to do conceptual planning from finish to start (vision) while his planning & scheduling engineers do detailed planning from start to finish (implementation). The purpose of doing planning early is to address big problems while they are still small.

In building a LNG Port in Qatar, the project manager envisioned the completed LNG Port. He had the renderings of the completed Port posted in each conference room. One can develop varying degrees of prototypes such as a 4D digital model or a 3D scaled model or a 2D drawing/photo of the completed project. The project manager then planned the facility backwards and gave the blueprint to the project controls staff to develop the detailed schedule accordingly. The project manager always referred to the renderings of the completed Port in every progress meeting.

HABIT FIVE: Address all items that threaten that plan

After a Plan is in place, identify events that can happen which might prevent the team from achieving that plan. Encourage and engage the entire project team to identify risks and develop mitigation plans. The project manager needs to manage risk proactively through decisive actions. With the project team (and the customer whenever possible), you should start by listing all events that can threaten the plan. Next, assign the probability of occurrence and the quantitative impact to each such event. Then develop an appropriate mitigation plan for each risk. Regularly visit the list to reassess events that can jeopardize the original plan. Working the original plan is a sub-habit of an effective project manager.

On a Power project in India, one key milestone (installation of a gas turbine) was at risk due to possible weather conditions (site port closed down during monsoon season). The project manager did not want to change the original plan. Early monsoon was identified as a risk item with a possible 2 month delay to the entire project. The project manager worked with the vendors to deliver key components ahead of schedule in order to mitigate that risk.

This habit of recognizing risk and being proactive with solutions is also identified as one of the “best practices” in project management. Those project managers who

seriously deploy a risk management practice in executing projects are definitely more effective in achieving the ultimate goal of ‘on budget and on schedule’.

HABIT SIX: Don’t just say it. Document it. Share it

Communication is critical and written communication is superior to verbal. For many reasons including legal, it is important to write down important events, instructions, decisions, directions, and statements because people have short and convenient memories and/or get reassigned to a different project and then forget or are not accessible. The project manager should develop a communications plan for the project identifying what type of information needs to be written and in which form. In many contracts, emails are not recognized as official documents even though they are written documents. Proper documentation can often prevent expensive lawsuits and claims. They also provide good historical data and lessons learned for executing similar projects in the future. Institutionalizing “lessons learned” is another identified ‘best practice” in project management.

The project manager must routinely share important communication with his or her stakeholders in a timely manner, particularly on global projects where members are located half a globe away. Sharing appropriate information with stakeholders in a timely manner is part of the next habit described in this paper.

On many projects it was observed that the customer will often provide verbal instructions to change project scope and then not approve the resulting change in cost and/or schedule. Many project managers have the habit of not sharing relevant information with their core group or client or senior management resulting in unpleasant delays and adverse cost impacts. One can avoid unnecessary rework if information is shared with the impacted party in a timely manner.

HABIT SEVEN: Limit surprises

The project manager has primary responsibility to 3 different stakeholder groups - Customer, own Senior Management, and core Project Team. It is best not to surprise any of these 3 groups. Whether it is good news or bad news, do not surprise your stakeholders with an untimely release. Make sure regular reporting addresses any issue in smaller doses as it happens.

It is general human nature to hide bad information, but hiding information is never a good idea. In many cultures this behavior is very common. Bad news never goes away with time. However, be careful with reporting good news too early or too exaggerated. Similarly reporting bad news too late leaves stakeholders with a feeling of helplessness and anger from not being able to influence the outcome.

On one large Telecom project in Saudi Arabia, the project manager kept ignoring high value adverse trends that dramatically changed the profitability of a lump sum multi-billion dollar contract. When he was finally forced to report the actual status of the project it was too late to take corrective measures. The project manager was fired and the company lost several hundred million dollars.

HABIT EIGHT: Celebrate major project milestones

Get people involved in your project. The best way to communicate with the 3 primary stakeholder groups (customer, senior management, and core project team) is to celebrate achievements of the project at each major milestone. Structure it as a positive ad for the project as it will add customer confidence and boost team morale. Celebrations allow the opportunity for face time with key stakeholders, provide visibility to senior management, and help the project manager become an approachable leader. Invite the customer and senior management to celebrations whenever possible.

One can use newsletters to communicate accomplishments across dispersed team members. Such simple celebrations motivate the team to achieve milestones on schedule and need not be very expensive. However, merely sending impersonal broadcast e-mails to announce achievement of major milestones can have a demotivating effect on the project team.

On one major Mining Construction project, the project manager scheduled major celebrations in the overall execution plan itself. This motivated the team to reach those milestones as early as possible. Team members need to believe that the project manager (and by extension, the client) values their efforts for completing key milestones. This is especially important for projects where the time between project start and end can span multiple years.

HABIT NINE: Set up a project recognition system

Performance based leadership yields results. A positive message is conveyed to all 3 stakeholder groups when people are rewarded for better performance. It is the project manager's responsibility and accountability to keep the project team fully motivated towards project objectives. A great way of enhancing the overall project value, goal, and objectives is to set up a reward and recognition system for high-performing team members. This encourages efficiency, fosters innovation, and energizes "out-of-the-box" thinking. The main objective of introducing a reward and recognition system is to ensure that team members feel appreciated and know that their work has not gone unnoticed. It also serves as a great way of pushing the team to do better throughout the project life cycle.

Foster a culture of encouragement and acknowledgement amongst your deputies and leads. Ensure that the entire project team is aware of the reward and recognition system, and that the criteria for expected levels of performance is clearly defined upfront so that decisions made are perceived as fair and just. If poor performers are awarded recognition, it can actually negatively affect team morale. Once put into place, the reward and recognition system should be highly achievable. As the expectancy theory suggests, any team member putting in the required level of effort toward better performance should fairly expect to be rewarded in a manner that is valuable to him or her.

Rewards and recognition can come in both monetary (extrinsic) and nonmonetary (intrinsic) forms. Monetary forms can include incentives, bonuses, perks, and training.

Nonmonetary forms can include appreciative feedback from supervisors/managers, recognition in front of peers, and certificates/plaques. A good practice is to have a balanced mix of rewards and recognition as different people are motivated by different factors. Rewards should also be large enough, and commensurate with each desired level of performance. Project managers can set up the reward and recognition system on a weekly, fortnightly, monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly, or annually basis. However, rewards that are more timely and consistent tend to result in greater satisfaction. If you want good people to work for you again on another project, you must develop this habit. The world is getting smaller all the time and you will likely run into the same people over the length of your career.

Implications for Project Management

Once we identified the 9 habits, we wanted to see how closely they align with PMI principles and best practices. The table below maps the 9 Habits of a High-Performing Project Manager against each of the 10 core PMI Knowledge Areas as identified in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) Guide.

Habits	PMI Knowledge Areas	Integration	Scope	Time	Cost	Quality	Human Resource	Communications	Risk	Procurement	Stakeholder
Take complete ownership of the project		✓						✓			✓
Enable core team to make decisions								✓			✓
Finish meetings with an “action items list”				✓				✓			
Plan from finish to start		✓	✓	✓				✓			
Address all items that threaten that plan					✓			✓	✓		
Don’t just say it. Document it. Share it						✓		✓			
Limit surprises								✓	✓		✓
Celebrate major project milestones							✓	✓			
Set up a project recognition system							✓	✓			

PMBOK defines a Knowledge Area as a complete set of activities that make up an area of specialization within project management. They are used on most projects most of the time, some more than others, which was evident in our mapping as well. Each habit generally mapped to anywhere between 1 and 3 Knowledge Areas. None of the habits specifically mapped to Project Procurement Management. However, our

most interesting finding was that Project Communications Management was the one common theme amongst all 9 habits. Project managers spend most of their time communicating with team members and other project stakeholders, from the onset of a project through execution and closeout. Therefore, it only makes sense that each of the 9 habits has an element of the processes that are required to ensure timely and appropriate planning, management, and the ultimate disposition of project information.

Conclusion

Habits are developed through experience and are shaped by many internal (company size, PM maturity level) and external (regulatory, customer, type of industry) standards, size of project, duration of project, and scope of project.

Each habit as a standalone is very simple and practical and can easily be adopted individually. However, the authors posit that together (all 9) these habits offer a guaranteed positive outcome. Even though applicable to any project anywhere, these habits are particularly valuable for managing large (\$50M+) and long duration (2+ years) projects.

References

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Appendix A

The table below outlines the author's collective project management experience and the source of data collected from PM professionals who worked on these projects:

#	Project Name	Type/Description	Total Project Value (USD\$)	Country
1	Hatch Nuclear power project (Georgia Power)	NRC Upgrade	300 Million	USA
2	Shoubrah Power - EEA/USAID/EXIM Bank	2x300 Mw Oil Power Plant, EPC*	600 Million	Egypt
3	Country Power study for CEGB	Feasibility Study	20 Million	UK
4	Piedra Buena Bahia Blanca Power Project	2x320Mw Gas & Oil, World Bank Study	10 Million	Argentina
5	King Fahd Armed Forces Hospital expansion	100 bed expansion, EPC*	100 Million	Saudi Arabia
6	Malaria Eradication Program	Health - WHO; Supply Chain	25 Million	India
7	Computer Training Center	Education/Training, I.T.	5 Million	USA
8	Import/Export Online Services	Dept. of Commerce - I.T.	10 Million	USA
9	Ras Laffan LNG Port	Infrastructure, EPC	900 Million	Qatar
10	Coal Refinery- R&D	Advance Technology	200 Million	USA
11	Dabhol Power Project	2,000 Mw Gas power Plant, EPC*	800 Million	India
12	TEP6 Telephone expansion project	AT&T/Lucent, EPC*	5.6 Billion	Saudi Arabia
13	4G Network upgrade	Cingular/AT&T, EP	500 Million	USA
14	Carbon Capture project	Research, Adv. Tech	100 Million	Norway
15	Nevada Test Site, DOE	Nuclear weapons stewardship	400 Million	USA
16	Yajva District Power Plant	400Mw Gas Power Project, EPC*	400 Million	Russia
17	Metro Washington DC	Metro expansion to Dulles airport, EPC*	5 Billion	USA
18	Iron Ore Canada	Iron Ore Expansion, EPC*	250 Million	Canada

#	Project Name	Type/Description	Total Project Value (USD\$)	Country
19	Coal seam LNG Projects	Curtis Island, Queensland, EPC*	20 Billion	Australia
20	Tank Farm - Oil & Gas	Oil export expansion, EPC*	300 Million	Kazakhstan
21	Dept. of Commerce BTOP	Grants Management	450 Million	USA
22	IRS Online Services	Digital Strategy	60 Million	USA
23	USPS Stamps By Mail	I.T. Upgrade	Not Available	USA
24	Dept. of Education EDCAPS	Grants Management	Not Available	USA
25	USA Spending.gov / IT Dashboard	Digital Strategy	Not Available	USA
26	GSA eCPIC	I.T. Upgrade	Not Available	USA
27	GSA CPO	HR Performance Management	Not Available	USA

About the Authors



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Arun Singhal, PE, MBA, PMP is a certified Project Management Professional and a six-sigma yellow belt with 30 years of experience on technically complex multi-billion dollar infrastructure projects worldwide including the USA, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, India, Canada, Australia, and Argentina. His projects include nuclear and fossil power plants, metro rail, voice & data telecommunication networks, iron ore mining and many more. He has trained more than a thousand senior managers around the world in project management. He holds a Bachelor and a Master degree in Mechanical Engineering from The George Washington University and a Master of Business Administration in Finance from The University of Kansas. Arun can be contacted at arunksinghal@msn.com.



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