

Interview with Caterina La Tona, BCS, PMP, PfMP Chair, PMI Board of Directors, 2015-2020



Interviewed by İpek Sahra Özgüler
Istanbul, Turkey

Caterina La Tona's career spans more than 30 years, serving multiple industries and characterized by successive global roles, setting strategy and delivering cornerstone initiatives. She is now an advisor, focused on realizing business transformation with IT executives and teams. As HP Executive Director, Ms. La Tona led the global transition/transformation and program/project management (PPM) capability, driving predictability and repeatability. People and process development were prime goals. Ms. La Tona strengthened the PPM job family to reflect success profiles and implemented a single global method and lessons learned process. As Transformation Executive for the EDS Manufacturing, Industrial and Energy Industry Group, she drove business results with IT executives through transformation advisory services and critical change initiatives. All facets of the business were affected, requiring strong leadership, integration and collaboration.

Ms. La Tona's former roles included positions in global portfolio management, contract negotiations and global manufacturing/engineering function management. The breadth of Ms. La Tona's experience positioned her to write and speak to diverse groups globally. Topics have included women in leadership, global project/program management, portfolio management, successful transition/transformation and management of change. She has traveled extensively, working with local teams, sharing knowledge and advancing objectives.

Ms. La Tona holds a Bachelor of Computer Science degree with honors from the University of Windsor and attended Thunderbird-American Graduate School of International Management's program focused on managerial issues in the global enterprise. She is a founding member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) Global Executive Council and has supported multiple PMI initiatives over the years. She has been a mentor for 12 years at EDS, HP and with the

Michigan Council of Women in Technology. Ms. La Tona enjoys cross country skiing, hockey and travel.

İpek Sahra Özgüler (Özgüler): *It appears that you have a wealth of experience working with different organizations worldwide. Can you provide some background on what your specific role is with the organizations you work with?*

Caterina La Tona (La Tona): My career has revolved around roles with global clients that want to be able to achieve their strategies and execute transformation initiatives successfully. These initiatives are critical to their ability to compete and their ability to deal with disruption. Today, disruption is the new normal. Organizations that succeed are able to quickly adapt to the changing market, geopolitical and technological conditions. Whether you are the disruptor -- or the one being disrupted -- you must continue to innovate to stay relevant. While organizations have always had to deal with disruptions, the difference with today's disruptions is the speed in which they come.

Helping organizations deal with critical challenges to successfully achieve their strategies and goals is my focus. The way that organizations do that is through change and transformation. I've had the unique opportunity to work with a lot of different companies across a lot of different industries to help them successfully navigate the transformation required.

To enable organizations to transform successfully, I must be able to bring the breadth of my knowledge, background, experiences and the toolkit of what I've learned over the years to the table. A critical part of that is the ability to assess an organization's culture, readiness for change, sponsorship and strategic alignment. As I look at embarking on a transformation, being able to say what will work for that particular organization is critical. It is a mistake to assume the same approach, tools and processes that worked for one organization will work for all. It's really a blend of art and science, understanding the organization, their strategy, their culture and the magnitude of the change.

As I think about my career and what my focus has been, it's been about helping organizations realize their vision through their strategic objectives. Each and every project was a stepping stone for those organizations and the ability to enable that is very rewarding.

Özgüler: *What do you look for when you evaluate an organization's sponsorship?*

La Tona: Essentially, how actively engaged their executive sponsors are on a project. I've had experience with actively engaged executive sponsors — and executive sponsors that are not properly engaged with a project. The difference is drastic.

Actively engaged executive sponsors help organizations bridge the gap between influencers and implementers to significantly increase collaboration and support, boost project success rates and reduce risk. Having an engaged sponsor ensures continued alignment between the strategy and the benefits the project is expected to realize.

Research continues to show that investing in actively engaged executive sponsors is a top driver of projects meeting their original business goals. In fact, in the 2018 *Pulse of the Profession*[®] survey, a global survey conducted by PMI that uncovers the latest trends in project management, organizations with a higher percentage of projects with actively engaged executive sponsors reported 40 percent more successful projects than those with a lower percentage of projects with sponsors.

I was asked recently how you determine who should be your executive sponsor. I suggest your executive sponsor should be the executive who has the most to gain from your project succeeding. That will help ensure they are actively engaged given their stake in its success.

Özgüler: *What does innovation mean to you?*

La Tona: Innovation to me is about looking at something from a different lens, resulting in something different being created or an improvement being made to something that currently exists. It should create a sense of excitement in both organizations and people. It should also have a meaningful purpose that takes us beyond where we are today, creating a positive outcome.

Being able to see something that's needed or desired before the customer themselves recognize it is what organizations strive for. Their ability to understand their customers, more than customers understand themselves, is where organizations have to be to compete. Project managers are at the forefront of enabling innovation. At the end of the day, that's what project managers do. They take ideas and turn them into reality.

Özgüler: *You've been a mentor with various groups including the Michigan Council of Women in Technology for twelve years. What does it mean to you to be a mentor for young women?*

La Tona: Being a mentor has given me the opportunity to provide young women with insight and guidance around the lessons I have learned. I want them to know the things that I wish I had known earlier in my career so it can accelerate their careers. As I mentor, I work with these women to better understand their goals and help them clarify for themselves the kinds of things that are important to them as they look toward the future. I try and help them see things from a different perspective so that they consider all viewpoints.

A woman I mentored was contemplating a career change. We sat down and discussed her strengths, passions and purpose — and we talked about what she wanted to accomplish in her

career. As she looked back on her career experiences and talked about what was important to her, it became quite clear to both of us that she needed a career change. Being able to help her go through that process and being able to get to a point where she was able to feel confident about making the decision was very rewarding. This is really what it's all about, helping others realize what's right for them, helping others improve and develop. I recently had someone say I inspired them. That really touched my heart and continues to fuel my desire for mentoring.

Giving back and mentoring is a passion of mine – and I've learned that one's time seems to expand to support their passions. As you become passionate about certain things, you figure out how to make the time.

Özgüler: ***What is a day in the life of a PMI Board Chair like?***

La Tona: As the Chair of the Board, my role is to provide leadership to the Board, guiding and enabling the board in fulfilling its responsibilities. My role is to also be a representative with stakeholders, reaching out to different communities to share the importance of project management as a profession and how it's changing. It's empowering for different individuals and organizations to hear about the difference that project managers can make in changing the world.

I recently visited the United Kingdom to discuss the value of project management and the findings of PMI's *2018 Pulse of the Profession*, providing insight into what successful organizations do to achieve their strategies. This year's report revealed a large need for organizations to use the benefits of project management to their advantage. In fact, the study found that around \$1 million is wasted every 20 seconds, collectively, by organizations around the globe due to the ineffective implementation of business strategy through poor project management practices. The insights presented in this year's *Pulse* are valuable for them to understand as they navigate the disruptive business climate in which we're operating.

Later that evening, I spoke with a group of students at Westminster University to provide them with similar insights, giving them the ability to see how they could differentiate themselves to prospective employers.

On a daily basis, I look to help lead the charge for PMI's ultimate mission of advancing careers, improving organizational success and furthering the profession of project management.

Özgüler: ***How is the approach to project management different today with new technologies present?***

La Tona: While technical skills are core to project and program management, PMI research has told us that they're not enough in today's increasingly complex and competitive global marketplace. The ideal skill set is a combination of technical, leadership, and strategic and business management expertise – something we call the PMI Talent Triangle®.

In my responsibility for the PPM and Transition and Transformation Capability with HP, one of the first areas of focus was talent. As we bolstered the job family, we quickly saw that as you move beyond the entry level positions, individuals really needed leadership, strategic and business management skills to truly be successful.

However, that's not to say that the technical skills shrink. Today more than ever, project managers need to continuously understand what technologies are out there and determine how to successfully bring them to bear in the projects that they are working on — whether it's artificial intelligence, cloud computing, blockchain or the new technology that arises tomorrow. It's a constant learning process to ensure you deliver the best in every project you take on.

About the Interviewer



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İpek Sahra Özgüler graduated from the Istanbul University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Engineering and from Middle East Technical University with an MSc degree in Software Management. As a project manager, she has more than 10 years' experience in various areas such as portfolio management, program management, project management, software management, business analysis. She became a certified PMP in January, 2012 and a certified SCRUM Master in 2014.

She has managed a variety of projects across manufacturing, defence, FMCG (Cola Cola), insurance (Euler Hermes), audit (Deloitte), telecommunication, ICT and aviation sectors and gained broader insights. In addition, she has worked as international correspondent for the *PM World Journal* since 2014.

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