

Positive Leadership in Project Management¹

Achieving Success is No Reason to Stop Seeking Success²

By Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow

A quote that caught my attention several years ago was in an article in an issue of Fast Company Magazine. The article was entitled “Keeping The Crisis in Chrysler” and the quote was “***We get stupid when we start succeeding.***” That quote should get you thinking, especially if your organization is currently experiencing some successful project or initiative outcomes. Success is a wonderful thing, we should embrace it, celebrate it and strive for it in our personal lives, in our businesses and in our project work. That particular quote does, however, bring to mind something that we have all experienced during periods where we were most successful. A feeling of safety, security, confidence, happiness, and maybe even invincibility. Success brings upon us a very comfortable feeling that we would like to have surround us for as long as possible. Success and the acknowledgments that accompany it release endorphins (*Endorphins are chemicals produced by the body to relieve stress and pain and boost happiness*). We experience a release of endorphins when something positive happens.

The feeling in many cases, actually produces a desire to experience more of the same. That same feeling can also cause leaders, including project managers, to temporarily lose sight of the need to pay attention to other important goals, objectives, issues and problems. Success sometimes causes people to “let their guard down” or reduce their normal level of work effort and intensity. Basically “gliding along” on the recent success. That, in turn, can result in a weakening of preparedness for the next challenge. It’s the over-confidence that leads to complacency.

It is our job as leaders to deliver a successfully completed project (Success, we know, is defined in many ways by different stakeholders). This is often far easier said than done. Additionally, when the project is delivered to the sponsor or client and end users and fully meets expectations, there should be some time set aside for celebration and recognition. The emphasis here is to celebrate your victories!

However, along with celebrations, some attention should be given to lessons learned, what is coming next, and what is changing in the business environment. Many Project Managers are either working on highly complex projects that span several years or they are working on multiple projects with durations of a few weeks to a few months.

¹This article is one in a series on Positive Leadership in Project Management by Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow, popular speaker and author of books on leadership in project management published by Wiley and IIL in the United States. Frank is widely known as the originator of the International Project Management Day, the annual celebrations and educational events conducted each November by PMI members, chapters and organizations around the world. Learn more in his profile at the end of this article.

² How to cite this paper: Saladis, F. (2020). Positive Leadership in Project Management - Achieving Success is No Reason to Stop Seeking Success. *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue II, February.

Regardless of project duration, we all know that change is an integral part of project management. Change affects projects of short and long duration, therefore project leaders should not allow the success of one project to create a belief that all future projects will experience the same or similar outcomes. We should certainly feel good about a successful outcome, but, it is important to maintain an awareness of factors that could overshadow a celebration of success. Sometimes an incident may occur that causes another project to become a living project management nightmare. Sometimes, the complacency, an after effect of success, is the cause root cause of a project or business disaster. There are many examples of this in history, especially military history, and in the sports world where a champion team somehow loses its momentum. The Fast Company article mentioned earlier in this article suggests the need to “keep your back to the wall.” This means that some pressure should be felt by the team or the organization even if things appear to be going well.

Instead of working in an environment where the team expects to “drive hard” for a period of time, achieve success, and then expect to see a “slump” at the end of the project where everyone can relax and bask in the glory, there should be a sense of the need for preparedness for the next potential project or initiative. This is not to suggest that teams should not be rewarded or victory celebrations to be downplayed or minimized, or that teams should expect to operate at 110% efficiency and productivity all of the time. They do need time to recharge while enjoying the positive returns of their efforts. Failure to acknowledge great work and providing some type of celebration can create significant morale issues later on.

The issue facing leaders is to make sure that even after a great success the momentum continues to fuel the team. In many cases, as suggested earlier, a feeling of complacency, even superiority, overtakes a project team or an organization after a big “win”. At that point, a team or organization loses its focus on its mission critical items. This is where the team may become most vulnerable to other risk factors and threats that may be emerging but not seen.

The leader must balance the need to recognize and celebrate success with the need to keep the team or the organization moving forward to the next level of achievement (Something like “continuous leadership and organizational development” – a journey, not a destination).

This can certainly be a challenge but it is far better to enjoy a continuous series of small successes than one huge success followed by long periods of mediocre performance. The leader provides the motivational fuel needed to continue the drive to success. The drive is punctuated along the way with “recognition pit stops,” points in time where accomplishments are noted, teams are thanked, refueling of energy and commitment takes place, and words of encouragement are provided to help get to the next milestone.

It is also important to keep the customer or client in mind at all times. The Fast Company article suggested that you should “remember the driver.” The analogy referred to the customers who buy and drive the cars. Success depends on customer satisfaction. “Customer Satisfaction is the defining element of success.

When a customer is satisfied, its cause for celebration but it is also a time to consider what exactly occurred to bring about the successful outcome. Take the time, along with rewards and recognition, to review lessons learned, obtain feedback and encourage the team to do more of what it took to achieve success.

One more key point that requires some attention is the need to define success from many perspectives. It can be defined very differently by the stakeholders involved.

Another key is to make sure your entire team understands that they are all in the project together and should share the same goals and objectives. Once you have achieved a common vision and a team that is energized through effective leadership and a desire to satisfy the customer, success won't be far behind.

Continued success is the payoff of **positive leadership in project management!**

Here is a little something extra: A Quick reference list of measurements of success:

- Revenue Growth
- Earnings per share
- % Increase in efficiency
- Retaining customers – usually expressed as a percent
- Add on business
- Team member satisfaction
- Increased Market share
- Customer satisfaction – usually includes quality, on time performance, cost control, mean-time to repair, responsiveness, availability, ease of doing business with, reliability, Safety of use and many others
- Reduction in Staff turnover
- Number / frequency of change requests
- Average time to respond (help desk)
- Number of defects identified and repaired
- Reduction in defects
- The project didn't make the front page, no major complaints (no news may be good news for some projects)
- High level of Senior leadership involvement and communication
- **Employee Personal satisfaction and self-value**

Regardless of how you measure success, the last item on the list should sum it all up. Success should mean that, above all other metrics, you and your team have experienced some personal value in the work you have done. You really want to continue feeling that value so don't stop looking down the road. Watch the signs, and stay ready for the next challenge. Success is just around the next curve so stay focused and drive on!

About the Author



Frank P. Saladis

New York, USA



Frank P. Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow is the Owner/Founder of Blue Marble Enterprises Inc. and Project Imaginers. Frank is an accomplished leader and contributor in the discipline of project management. He is the author of 12 published books, the past editor of the All PM Newsletter and the author of over 160 project management articles. Frank provides training and consulting internationally and has educated and entertained countless audiences with a special blend of project management knowledge and tasteful humor. He is also an experienced and well-known project management instructor and consultant and a member of the PMI® Seminars World team of trainers. Mr. Saladis' 35 year career includes 28.5 years with AT&T, 3 years with Cisco Systems, and more than 25 years as a professional trainer, facilitator, mentor and keynote speaker.

Frank is the Originator/Founder of International Project Management Day which launched in 2004 and has been growing in recognition yearly. The goal of International Project Management Day is the worldwide recognition of the many project managers and project teams in every industry including nonprofit organizations and health care who contribute their time, energy, creativity, innovation, and countless hours to deliver products, services, facilities, and provide emergency and disaster recovery services in every city and community around the world.

Frank was PMI's 2006 Person of the Year. Frank is a Project Management Professional, a graduate from the PMI Leadership Institute Master's class, and has contributed significantly to the organization's growth and knowledge base for more than 20 years. His leadership activity within PMI included the position of President of the New York City PMI chapter from 1991-2001, President of the Assembly of Chapter Presidents, and Chair of the Education and Training Specific Interest Group. He received the high honor of the "PMI Fellow Award" in October 2013 and received the very prestigious "PMI Distinguished Contribution Award" in October 2015.

Frank can be contacted at saladismp@msn.com