

Almost Everything We Use Daily Is the Result of a Project

Interview with Frank Saladis, PMI Fellow^{1,2}

Author, Speaker, Teacher, Consultant
PM Leadership Expert
New York, USA



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Introduction to the interviewee

Frank Saladis, PMP and PMI Fellow, is widely viewed as an outstanding leader in the project management industry. For more than three decades, he has been devoted to promoting the concepts of leadership, people skills, building good relationships, integrity, competence, volunteerism and ongoing education.

He is an internationally renowned keynote speaker, author, consultant and instructor / facilitator in the project management discipline. He has written 12 books related to project management and has published more than 170 articles about PM and / or leadership.

He has made a significant contribution to the international project management training

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community and professional project management practitioner community through his education programs, consulting, and his collaboration with multiple education providers and training institutions. His contributions have been rewarded by awards such as PMI Person of the Year Award (2006), IIL Distinguished Service Award (2007), PMI Distinguished Contribution Award (2015).

Interview

Part I About project management story

Q1. You have been in the profession of project management for over 35 years. In your eyes, where does the charm of the profession lie? In other words, which parts of the profession attract you most?

Frank Saladis (Saladis): The charm is found in many areas such as meeting new people, learning about different cultures when traveling, the challenges encountered in managing a project and the feeling of success when a problem is resolved, a project is completed or the client is delighted. Project management is an ongoing learning and leadership experience: leading a team, working with talented people, finding creative ways to get things done and learning from team members. The profession also provides opportunities to network, and, for many, the opportunity to speak at PM events and symposiums. Presenting to colleagues is exciting and a little risky, which makes it more interesting and fun.

Q2. As an active member in the PM community, you've been awarded many awards such as PMI Distinguished Contribution Award. What are the contributions that you are most proud of?

Saladis: I have been a PM member since 1990. I have held various leadership positions including Co-chair of the Council of Chapter Presidents, President of the Assembly of Chapter Presidents, and President of the PMI NYC Chapter. I have written 12 books related to project management and have published more than 170 articles about PM and / or leadership. My biggest contribution was the creation of International Project Management Day (IPM Day) which is a day of recognition for project managers and is observed on the first Thursday of November every year.

Q3. As the originator of International Project Management Day, would you please talk about the reason and significance of setting up such a day?

Saladis: Project managers are rarely recognized for the work they do. Many people really have no idea about what project managers actually do. Many of the contributions of project managers and teams are taken for granted. Just about everything people use every day is the result of a project: cars, trucks, planes, buildings, highways, smart phones, laptops, boats, IT infrastructure, etc. IPM Day is simply a day to say thanks for

the work project managers and teams do to give us all of the things we use daily in our lives.

Part II About positive leadership

Q4. You've written a lot about the topic of "Positive Leadership". What is it about and why is it important?

Saladis: Project managers are placed in leadership positions when they are assigned to a project. Positive leadership is about attitude, concern for the team, creating high-performing teams, listening to the ideas of others, not commanding and ordering but providing direction support, empowerment, and motivating people. It's about respect, being assertive when necessary and acknowledging people for great work.

Positive leadership provides a number of benefits to a team and to an organization. Practicing positive leadership creates greater loyalty among employees, team members, clients and other stakeholders. The practice of positive leadership creates an environment of trust, creativity, and willingness to expend more energy and effort during challenging times. There are 7 capacities associated with Positive Leadership:

- Authenticity – credibility of the leader, and self-confidence;
- Purpose – having a clear direction, being driven to reach goals, motivating others to accept and move forward in that direction;
- Sponsorship – taking the time to define what is important and why, and focusing on the things that make sense for the organization and investing in them;
- Resilience – bouncing back after a disappointment;
- Community Building – bringing people together and fostering collaboration;
- Reason – making wise decisions, seizing opportunity, identifying opportunities, assessing risks, minimizing threats; and
- Gratitude – appreciating the contributions of others and sincerely acknowledging them.

Positive leadership is not about wearing a smile all the time and being an extreme optimist. Positive leaders empower others, focus on continuous improvement, listen to new ideas, accept responsibility for their decisions, admit their mistakes, and are in a constant state of learning. They also encourage their teams and employees to continue learning and developing professionally.

Q5. Based on your observation, what does an innovative and creative leader look like?

Saladis: Someone who listens to the ideas of others, has an open mind, takes reasonable risks, looks beyond the obvious, reads a lot, experiments with new things, encourages creativity within his or her team, always looks for the "second right answer", has time for some fun and allows the mind to wander occasionally, and finds time to use "present mindedness" to develop new ideas.

Part III Basic suggestions about managing difficult stakeholders

Q6. Please share some suggestions on how to deal with difficult stakeholders, will you?

Saladis: There are lots of difficult stakeholders and they show up on every project. Dealing with them is a challenge and there are many types of difficult stakeholders. The very basic suggestions would be – Manage your emotions, ask open-ended questions, try to find the reason or the motivation that is driving the behavior. Be flexible whenever possible, practice active listening, do not pretend to be a therapist, for very difficult situations, seek the advice of experts, and be careful about what you say and how you respond (nonverbal signals). These situations can lead to potential litigation.

Part IV About value

Q7. You've written a book titled "Value-Driven Project Management". What is the core message of the book? How do you define value?

Saladis: The book focuses on a different set of metrics "Value Metrics". These metrics focus on how people perceive the actual usefulness and benefit of a product or service – items such as reliability, ease of use, maintainability, durability, maintainability, availability. An easy way to define value is to ask the question: What do you truly "love" about the product? This question will provide an opportunity to define what value actually is to an individual. Value is not about price paid, but about what the individual experiences when using the product or service.

Q8. Stakeholders in a project may have different definitions about value, so how to balance them?

Saladis: There is a need to balance the many definitions and perceptions of value among stakeholders. This can be challenge. The key here is to make sure you understand what each stakeholder values and why. In many cases, there is a lot of commonality, possibly expressed differently. When discussing value with stakeholders, it is very likely that the most important items, as defined by the stakeholders, will appear at or near the top of the list of what is valued most. This actually makes it easier to establish some degree of balance. It's important to note that there can only be one "top" priority, and everything else is subordinate to that priority. A strong leader, with good facilitation skills and a lot of "business sense" can work with stakeholders and, through some negotiation, reach agreement with the stakeholders about what is most valued. The focus should always be on what is most beneficial for the organization as a whole and not on the specific needs of a functional group.

Part V About project success and failure

Q9. In your opinion, what are the keys to project success? To start with, how do you measure project success?

Saladis: The simple answer is "on time, within budget, according to the defined

scope and at the appropriate level of quality”. A better answer may be to ask the questions: Have we delighted our client, our management, and our team members? Have we created a strong relationship with our suppliers and other key stakeholders? Have we utilized our resources efficiently? Will the team members be willing to work with the project manager again?

For project managers, there are plenty of “keys to success”. A few to consider would be: to be willing to listen to new ideas, recognize the contributions of teams and team members, keep in mind that you don’t know everything, ask questions, invite opposing or different views, be respectful at all times, especially during a disagreement, maintain your personal health, share what know as much as possible, and help others to be successful.

Q10. You’ve done trainings on how to save failed projects, but failed projects should fail fast, right? What kinds of failed projects are worth the saving efforts?

Saladis: I don’t subscribe to the “fail fast and hurry up and fail” approach when it comes to projects. The goal should be to succeed but not to be afraid of failure.

The “hurry up and fail” and “fail fast” doesn’t work in a project environment. This approach is basically a way of saying “get going and get something done quickly”. If you go fast enough, you’ll fail sooner. It sounds like “drive faster so you can hit a tree or have an accident quicker”. The “fail fast” approach actually has a message: “The sooner you fail, the sooner you will learn something”. I guess that works well in new product development and R&D, and maybe in the AGILE techniques. In what is referred to as “traditional” project management, failing fast is not desirable. Risk management is emphasized and risk prevention, risk avoidance, and risk mitigation are a major part of the planning process.

Regarding the question about saving troubled projects, projects become troubled for many reasons such as poor leadership, poor management support, poor planning, insufficiently skills team members, volatile technology, unknowns, etc. For projects in trouble, the questions that should be asked are: Can it be saved? Why should it be saved? What would happen if it wasn’t saved? How will it impact our business or our reputation? How much effort will be involved? What are the risks?

I actually wrote a paper about steps to save a troubled project and presented it at a PMI World Congress several years ago. The paper was entitled “CPR (Critical Path Resuscitation) for IT Projects. The paper was based on the actions that are commonly taken in a hospital emergency room. The first step is to take vital signs, and look for signs of injury, trauma and immediate needs. The next step is to stabilize, attempt to establish a known and stable state (if possible). And next step is the diagnosis, a deeper look to see what is actually happening, then a prescribed approach for recovery. This is somewhat oversimplified but the approach is typically applied to projects that are failing. Generally, a special team is formed or there is additional support provided to the project manager and a series of steps, similar to the steps taken to start a new project, are applied to recover the failing project.

Part VI About senior executives

Q11. It is suggested that we should enhance the project role in the boardroom by such means as setting up a position like Chief Project Officer (CPO). Do you agree? Since you've written a book "What Executives Need to Know about Project Management", I believe you most probably will agree with this view. So what are the things that executives need to know about project management?

Saladis: The executives need to know that nothing goes exactly as planned. Since executives probably do not know the actual productivity level of their employees (it is not 100%), they should not set predetermined objectives regarding time and cost. Making scope changes without understanding the impact should be avoided. Getting involved in day-to-day project work is not helpful and not a good use of an executive's time. Set expectations clearly with project managers (or managers of project managers). Adopt an enterprise-wide PM methodology.

Q12. In reality, what does a perfect executive look like?

Saladis: I don't know if there is a perfect executive. The qualities that I have seen in executives that seem to work well and create a strong organization include: self-confidence, openness, willingness to listen, firmness with fairness, being well-spoken, being knowledgeable, being likeable (as in genuine, respectful, easy to talk to), willingness to share information, being respectful, and showing genuine support and confidence in his or her leadership team and employees.

Q13. What should project managers do to get the support of executives to facilitate project success?

Saladis: Project managers and the project executives should set their expectations of each other up front at the beginning of a project. Expectations should be set both ways and should be clear and intentional. This will set the tone for the relationship. Knowing what is expected during the project provides a foundation for collaboration and will minimize surprises and disagreements or conflicts.

Part VII About AGILE

Q14. Being agile is a fad. What should organizations pay attention to in agile transformation?

Saladis: Agile is not a fad, but an evolving methodology. Organizations should assess their internal projects and the projects they manage for clients. Transforming to an AGILE approach requires organizational leaders to fully understand the types of projects that are in progress or in the pipeline. They must also REALLY understand what AGILE means. There are different "flavors" of AGILE, including SCRUM, eXtreme Programming, Feature Driven Development, and more recently, Disciplined AGILE, and

organizational leaders should take the time to learn and understand the basic concepts of AGILE. The AGILE Manifesto and the 12 Principles of AGILE provide a fundamental understanding of the approach. Generally, AGILISTS believe that the approach provides faster results, increases customer satisfaction, emphasizes the value of teamwork, and reduces rework. But it is not the “PM Silver Bullet” that many people have been led to believe. It is an approach that works in some situations and it continues to evolve.

Part VIII About managing virtual teams

Q15. With COVID-19 spreading globally, virtual teams are common. Would you please offer some tips on managing virtual teams?

Saladis: This can be a challenge but there are many things leaders can do when managing a virtual team. Meet frequently but not for long periods of time. Remain connected to each team member individually. Actually have a conversation, not just email and texts. Change your routine during virtual meetings, do not fall into a “meeting pattern”. Ask team members to facilitate meetings, because the leader does not have to facilitate every meeting. This gives everyone a chance to practice their meeting skills and it also give them a greater sense of responsibility.

Part IX About the future of PM

Q16. How do you view the future of being a project manager? What top competencies are necessary to survive and thrive as a PM in the VUCA-influenced world?

Saladis: I like to use the Yogi Berra quote, “The future ain’t what it used to be.” Technology is evolving rapidly and project managers (especially aspiring project managers that will have to focus on the IoT and AI products) are now on the very near horizon. Some technical savvy will be needed along with very strong communications, leadership, coordination, integration, and problem solving, skills. The future PM will be a collaborator, negotiator, critical thinker, and have the qualities of creativity and innovation.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit

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About the Interviewer



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Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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