

Develop your influence as a project manager ¹

Alfonso Bucero, MSc, CPS, PMP, PMI-RMP, PMfP, IPMO-E, PMI Fellow

The first question that came to my mind when I decided to write this article was to answer the question: “Why write an article about influence?” I believe influence is a key skill a project manager must develop. Over the years, I have managed different projects and without being conscious of it, I influenced many people indirectly through my behavior, actions, and decisions.

When I first started as a project manager, persuading individuals to help reach project goals was a difficult issue for me. After a few years, I realized that everyone had an impact on others. It makes no difference who you are or what you do. You don't have to work in a high-profile position to have clout. In reality, if your life intersects with the lives of others in any manner, you have the ability to affect them. Everything you do at work, at home, and with your coworkers and friends affects the lives of those around you.

As a project manager, you have influence over all project stakeholders. In fact, becoming a person of influence is essential if you want to be a successful project manager and have a positive impact on your projects. There can be no success without influence. If you're a project manager, for example, your success hinges on your ability to positively impact your team members. If you understand how to become a person of influence, no matter what your professional or personal goals are or what you want to achieve, you will be able to reach them faster, be more successful, and your contribution will last longer.

It is well known that many project managers do not have authority but nevertheless they need to have influence in order to achieve project success. Influence is invisible because it is about how people think. We cannot see people's thoughts. Thoughts drive behavior that drives actions and results. We can look at the results that influential project managers achieve but still have no idea about what makes them influential. Just as we cannot understand a person by looking at his shadow, we cannot understand influence by looking at its effect. We have to look for the causes of influence, not at its symptoms.

I believe thinking like an influencer is the first and most important step to becoming an influential project manager. We do not need to sell our soul or clone our brain to become influential. We do not need to become someone else. We simply need to build on the best of who we already are.

¹ How to cite this article: Bucero, A. (2022). Develop your influence as a project manager, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue IV, April.

Your influence is not the same with all people

Influence, I've seen, is a strange phenomenon. Even though we have the ability to influence practically everyone in our environment, our level of influence is not the same for everyone. Do your team members all respond the same way when you offer an idea or make a suggestion to them in a team meeting? Obviously not. One person may believe that all of your ideas are brilliant. Someone else might be skeptical of all you say. You can figure out which one you need to affect. On the other side, if your concept were offered by an executive, the skeptic who first opposed it might be more open to it.

If you pay attention to people's responses to yourself and others, you can see that people respond to one another according to their level of influence. I consider influence like a specific application of influence. Influence does not come to us instantaneously; it grows by stages.

What we see has an impact on us. When my children were younger, for example, no matter what I told them to do, their natural inclination was to do what they saw me do. Now that they are grownups, this no longer occurs. Perhaps this is because when people are growing, they don't require the authority of others to move forward. They don't require the father's authorization. For most people, if they believe that you are positive and trustworthy and have admirable qualities, they will seek you as an influencer in their lives. And the better they get to know you, the greater your credibility will be and the higher your influence can become if they like what they see. For example, when I deliver training sessions and workshops and I promise to share some information with the workshop attendees, after the workshop (exercises, templates and examples), I am sending the promised information to them.

If you were to attend project management congresses, the people you meet there do not know you, and at first you have no influence with them at all. If someone they trust introduces you to them and gives you an endorsement, you can temporarily "borrow" some of that person's influence. It happened to me many years ago; let me share with you my story: *I had published my first article in PM Network in 2002. It happened because Randall L. Englund, my best friend, who is an executive consultant, speaker, and author, lent me his influence when he introduced me to PM Network editor Ross Foti. Randy had a very good reputation as a book author. He had written several articles for PM Network and other magazines, and he is the author of five books in the project management field.* Obviously I needed to get some columns published until I was recognized. They will assume that you are credible until they know you better. But as soon as they have some time to observe you, you neither build nor bust that influence by your actions. Some people are very influenced by the image a well-known person has because of the actions and attitudes they believe that person represents.

If you really want to make a difference in other people's lives, you have to do it up close. This gets us to the second degree of influence: *motivating others*. When you encourage individuals and engage with them on an emotional level, you motivate them. The procedure forms a bridge between you and them, as well as their self-esteem and confidence. For example, at professional conferences, I constantly urge people to engage and share their experiences with others. I often remind people about my first time presenting a paper on project management at an international conference and how the positive response from the audience motivated me to do so again and again.

Mentoring, in my opinion, is the third level of influence. This entails paying attention to people's concerns and needs. You won't be able to solve their problems right away, but at the very least, you'll be able to share comparable experiences with them. It is critical to have a good attitude. I'm fortunate in that I'm presently serving as a PMI Region Mentor, so I'm familiar with the challenges and tensions that develop in professional organizations. The key is to learn how to be an active listener; you must listen to your mentees successfully if you want to influence them. Stop thinking and pay attention to them first, then grasp the topic or problem, consider options, and finally try to reach an agreement.

Multiplying is the fourth level of impact. The multiplication level is the maximum level of effect you can have on other people's life. As a multiplying influencer, you assist those you influence in becoming good influencers in the lives of others, passing on not only what you've taught them, but also what they've learned on their own. Although few people achieve this degree of power, everyone has the potential to do so. You can be a role model for the masses, but you must engage with people to achieve higher degrees of influence. What you say and, more importantly, what you do sets an example for others who follow in your footsteps.

Positive influencers add value to the lives of others. As you read this book, I'm not sure what type of influence you have on others. Your actions may have an impact on hundreds of people, or you may only have an impact on two or three team members or coworkers. The amount of people isn't the most significant consideration. The important thing to understand is that your level of influence does not remain constant. Even if you have had a negative effect on others in the past, you can turn that around and make your impact a positive one. I want to help you become a project manager of high influence. You can have an incredibly positive impact on the lives of others. You can give a lot of value to them.

I'm not sure what your life goal is or what kind of legacy you want to leave. However, if you want to have an impact, you must develop the ability to influence others. As a project manager, your fate is to learn from your mistakes when it comes to project management. My best advice for acquiring influence is to get to know people better, learn from their reactions, and gradually you will have a better understanding of their reactions and be better prepared to influence them.

My personal story

I've been repeating my horse joke every time I need to persuade someone on the power of one's project management principles for several years. You can only sell anything if you believe in it. This is a joke I tell my customers, coworkers, and peers. I attempt to pass on my enthusiasm for telling jokes to others, and I believe I have done so several times. However, when I used that narrative over the years, I was not aware of how I was influencing people.

Many people remember me because of that joke; I think that means that I was able to influence them in some way. But let me tell it: Let's imagine a gipsy who wants to sell a horse, and the gipsy says to a man: "I want to sell you a horse". The man answers him: "I don't need any horse." "Oh yes, you need it," says the gipsy, "You have some children and a wife. This horse wakes up very early in the morning, does all the housework, goes to the supermarket to do your shopping, and when you come back in the evening the meals are cooked. This is a fantastic horse. You need to buy it." The man says: "I don't believe you, but I'll buy that horse." Two months later the gipsy and the man meet each other again, and the man says to the gipsy: "That is an awful horse. It bothers my neighbors at 3:00 am it kicks my children every day. I hate that horse. Please take away that horse. The gipsy man smiles and says, "Continue talking about the horse that way and you will not be able to sell it again".

When I examined my story over the years, I discovered that I was influencing project managers and executives' behaviors in my talks and presentations by using my horse story. Although this story is an example of persuasion, I always use it to show project managers that they must believe in their projects in order to get executive buy-in. Every project is a "horse" you need to believe in, because if not you cannot sell it to your customer, to the rest of project stakeholders.

Persuasion consists of moving other people to accept our point of view voluntarily. Influence is the ability to exert power on somebody else. People who influence does not want to change attitudes, but people who persuade tries to change them. have become well-known worldwide because of my positive attitude managing projects. What I learned is that every one of us influences people every day, but we are often not conscious of it many times. Remember, if you want to influence people, if you want to sell an idea or proposal to somebody, you need to prepare yourself (and the horse) if you want to be able to sell it.

What is your story?

Please reflect upon the type of influence you are practicing with your project stakeholders. What are you doing to make a difference in your people and influence them positively? You can do it because you are a great professional but you will always have some room for

improvement. Today is a good day to improve your level of influence and being more and more successful as a project manager. Go for it!

Summary

I believe that influence is a critical ability for a project manager to master throughout his or her career. Everything you do at work, at home, with your coworkers, and with your friends has an impact on the people around you. Thinking like an influencer is the first and most important step to becoming an influential project manager.

To be influential, we don't need to sell our souls or clone our brains. We don't have to change into someone else. All we have to do now is built on the best aspects of who we currently are. Consider that not everyone has the same level of influence as ourselves.

You must develop the ability to influence others if you want to make an effect. When it comes to project management, your fate as a project manager is to learn from your mistakes. My best tip for gaining influence is to get to know individuals better and learn from their reactions. This way, you will gradually gain a better knowledge of their reactions and be better equipped to influence them.

Believe that you can influence your project stakeholders better and efficiently, work on that because influence for me means taking care of a set of personal details when you deal with people in projects.

Remember that every day is a good day to improve, so assess your influence skills, and make a plan to improve. Then implement it.

About the Author



Alfonso Bucero

Madrid, Spain



Alfonso Bucero, MSc, CPS, ACE, PMP, PMI-RMP, PfMP, SFC, IPMO-E, PMI Fellow, is an International Correspondent and Contributing Editor for the *PM World Journal* in Madrid, Spain. Mr. Bucero is also the founder and Managing Partner of BUCERO PM Consulting. Alfonso was the founder, sponsor, and President of the PMI Barcelona Chapter until April 2005 and belonged to PMI's LIAG (Leadership Institute Advisory Group). He was the past President of the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter and then nominated as a PMI EMEA Region 8 Component Mentor. Alfonso was a member of the PMIEF Engagement Committee. Alfonso has a Computer Science Engineering degree from Universidad Politécnica in Madrid and is studying for his Ph.D. in Project Management. He has 32 years of practical experience and is actively engaged in advancing the PM profession in Spain and Europe. Alfonso received the *PMI Distinguished Contribution Award* on October 9, 2010, the *PMI Fellow Award* on October 22, 2011, and the *PMI Eric Jenett Excellence Award* on October 28, 2017. Alfonso can be contacted at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.