

Leadership is not a Title!

Interview with Andy Kaufman¹

**Award- winning Project Management & Leadership
Keynote Speaker, Author & Coach, President of the Institute for
Leadership Excellence & Development Inc**



Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

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Introduction to the interviewee

Andy Kaufman, PMP is an international speaker, author, & executive coach, and President of the Institute for Leadership Excellence & Development Inc. Andy works with organizations around the world, helping them improve their ability to deliver projects & lead teams.

His keynotes, workshops, and executive coaching services have reached tens of thousands of people from hundreds of companies over the years, helping them deliver their projects, become more confident leaders, take focused action, and deliver results. He brings a rich background of over 25 years of experience in executive management, technology, team leadership, project management, consulting, coaching.

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He is a certified trainer and author of “Navigating the Winds of Change: Staying on Course in Business & in Life”, “Shining the Light on The Secret”, and an e-book entitled “How to Organize Your Inbox & Get Rid of E-Mail Clutter”, all published by Zurich Press. He is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) and a member of the Project Management Institute (PMI®).

He is the host of “The People and Projects Podcast” (<http://PeopleAndProjectsPodcast.com> or any podcast app) which provides interviews and insights to help listeners lead people and deliver projects. The podcast focuses on the intersection of People and Projects—where work gets done in the real world.

He is a recognized expert on topics related to leadership, project management, managing conflict, networking, relationships, time management, team building, and delivering results.

Read more and get in touch with Andy at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/buildleaders/>

Join Andy’s community: LEAD52 <https://GetLEAD52.com>

Interview

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Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. You have several hats. Let’s begin with your fantastic podcast **People and Projects Podcast** you’re running since 2009. What are the data today about your podcast? Why did you start a podcast when podcasts were not famous at all? It’s a lot of work and dedication; why do you go on doing it?

Andy Kaufman (Kaufman): Great question, Yasmina! I started my career as a software developer so in many ways, I’m a geek at heart. In 2009, I was interviewed for a podcast. After we were done recording, I asked the podcast host questions about his workflow and how podcasts worked. The geek in me thought, “Hey, I can do that!” So I started it as an experiment. It felt like it would be a way to have conversations with interesting people and add value to the project management community.

What I didn’t know then was what a learning adventure it would be. As of this interview, we have published over 365 episodes and over those years, guests have consistently challenged me to think differently about leading and delivering.

The People and Projects Podcast has a global audience and is regularly in the Top 50 in the Apple Podcasts directory for the Management category in many countries. It is unquestionably a lot of work, but it’s a labor of love that keeps me and my team happily learning!

Q2: What was the initial aim of your podcast? Has your goal changed over the years?

Kaufman: Most days I'm teaching project management or leadership at organizations around the world. I knew up front that I didn't just want to take our workshop content and turn it into podcast episodes.

I wanted to bring world class thought leaders into a discussion that would be practical and engaging. In many ways, I wanted to create a podcast that I would want to listen to. A lot of effort goes into trying to make it entertaining while being truly helpful.

That overall goal hasn't changed over the years. I strive to be a better interviewer and host each year, and our production quality is much better. But the same goal remains of providing discussions that are truly of value to our project community.

Q3: Along with the podcast, there is a community LEAD52. What's the aim? How does it work?

Kaufman: We have had great results with our leadership workshops and keynotes. Whether it's an hour keynote or a weeklong workshop, people can learn tools to grow their ability to lead and deliver. But then what?

The goal of the LEAD52 initiative is to provide short helpful insights in brief, weekly email messages that can be read in 5 minutes or less. Each week there's a topic that our entire global community works on. At the end of the week, there's a recap of insights from our community members and some more food for thought.

52 weeks of learning delivered to your inbox that takes only a small amount of time. And it's all for free. The feedback has been heart-warming.

Q4: You moved from software engineer (key technical) to director, leadership expert, and coach. How have you developed as a leadership expert? In what ways must engineers overcome more challenges about leaderships?

Kaufman: One of the lessons we eventually discover is that the more we know, the more we realize we don't know! Going from an individual contributor as a software developer, to a team leader, to manager, director, and vice president was a journey filled with lessons at each level.

Back in episode 226, I interviewed an author named Marc Effron. He told me about the 70 / 20 / 10 idea, where 70% of the way we learn things is by doing it. You want to learn how to lead projects? Lead a project! You might make a lot of mistakes but that's how we learn. 20% is by seeing it modelled or being mentored. 10% is taking a class or reading a book.

That model illustrates how I grew as a leader. I learned from the missteps of my 70%. I had helpful mentors to account for the 20%. And I've taken plenty of classes and read many books to cover the 10%.

It's not important for an engineer to aspire to be a manager—many would be perfectly happy to remain in an individual contributor role. And they would flourish there.

Yet even in that role, the vast majority of them must interact with others in order to be successful. They need to influence so their ideas get considered. They typically rely on others to get work done, which means they need to learn to work with different personalities, preferences, and opinions.

Leadership is not a title. It's how we facilitate work getting done with and through others. We would all do well to keep working on our leadership competencies.

Q5: What are the 3 lessons learned about your career that can help leaders today?

Kaufman: First, I have greatly benefited from the notion that “Unless there is a compelling reason to say No, say Yes.” Some of the most career influencing opportunities came from saying Yes. Many of those were scary—it would have been easier to say No. Like the time I was given the opportunity to speak at Microsoft TechEd in front of 7,500 people. At that time I was fearful in front of 10 people! But I said Yes and it started me onto the path of what I'm doing now. And I could not be happier or more fulfilled. But it wouldn't have happened if I would have said No.

Second, the dirty little secret of business is that everything is done on the basis of relationships. Regardless of personality, networking is not something you do when you're looking for a job. It's breathing. You never stop doing it. Years ago I interviewed Devora Zack about her book *Networking for People Who Hate Networking*. It's a great resource for those who fit the title!

Finally, here's a lesson I learned from interviewing David Epstein about his book *Range*. When talking about grit, he makes this statement, “Instead of asking *whether* someone is gritty, we should ask *when* they are.” The idea is that we each have situations where we demonstrate tremendous grit. But other times we too easily give up.

I've learned to apply this idea in countless other ways. It's not whether you are introverted or extroverted—it's *when* you are. It's not a matter of if you have leadership presences—it's *when* you do. And, interestingly, when you *don't*.

This single idea is empowering for our careers. Don't settle for simple labels. Keep working to grow your abilities. Careers are wonderful journeys.

Q6: You are also the president of the Institute for Leadership Development & Excellence Inc. Since the pandemic broke out, have you seen some new requests in workshops? leadership development?

Kaufman: We have had our busiest years since the pandemic. Just as companies are realizing that productivity doesn't necessarily plummet when people are working virtually, we have found that our engagement techniques are proving that virtual training can deliver the same value when done well. In addition to our onsite speaking, we've been doing virtual training for over a decade. We didn't have to pivot to it as a result of the pandemic. And though I'm onsite with clients more now than last year, a sizeable part of our training sessions are being successfully conducted virtually.

From a topic perspective, the demand for project management training continues to be strong. But we've seen an increase in requests for learning about executive presence, managing up, influencing skills, and managing our time and commitments. We have a program called the Leadership Fast Track that has been even more requested since COVID.

Q7: "Get out of your comfort zone" is an expression we hear a lot; How do you interpret this expression? How do you apply it in leadership development?

Kaufman: I have interviewed Dr. Edgar Schein twice. He's the MIT Fellow who coined the term "corporate culture". Though in his 90's now, he's still quite sharp mentally and an active contributor to leadership thinking.

Dr. Schein said something that is relevant to your question. He observed that there is anxiety related to learning. To changing—whether we choose the change or it is inflicted upon us.

In terms of your question, it's easier to stay in our comfort zone and avoid that pain.

So how do we get out of that comfort zone? His observation is that "learning only happens when survival anxiety is greater than learning anxiety."

What I've learned is that it's best to not wait until the point of survival anxiety! Don't wait until your job is eliminated. Don't wait until the economy tanks. Don't wait until your job is no longer relevant because it can be automated.

This single idea has been a catalyst for continual learning for me.

Q9: What's your definition of a good leader in the post-covid world?

Kaufman: I have interviewed many leading voices on leadership—before and during COVID. Interestingly, there's not one accepted definition of leadership. There are numerous lists of what leaders do vs. managers. The famed management expert Henry Mintzberg told me he hates those lists because no one could possibly fit the descriptions!

I would suggest that good leadership post-COVID is almost completely the same as pre-COVID. Leadership is about people. It's about vision—aligning people to that vision, inspiring them to keep going despite obstacles that will be encountered.

Perhaps the best leadership advice I've ever gotten if it had to be boiled down to three words, it's this: Figure it out. Ha! That's what leaders do! When faced with struggles, we don't finger point to deflect blame to others. We don't whine and complain. We work with and through others to "figure it out."

A challenge I have for all of us is a quote from my interview with author Michael Timms: "Would anybody willingly follow you if they weren't being paid to do so?"

Q10: What changes do you foresee in project management in the coming years?

Kaufman: I've had the privilege of interviewing multiple futurists. Interestingly, futurists don't predict the future. They work to identify assumptions about the future, and then use those assumptions to help people prepare for multiple potential future outcomes.

With that in mind, I think we should all assume that the people side of project management will remain critical. We should assume automation will continue to help us with the repetitive and analytical aspects of our role. But they won't be so effective at navigating organizational politics. Or calming down a cranky stakeholder.

I think we should assume there will increasing demand for delivering value more quickly. I believe that good project management has always been agile - realizing that well intentioned people can disagree about what the even means! But I'm convinced we need to stay hungry to learn new tools and techniques to understand the business needs and deliver value as early and often as possible.

I think we should assume that new models and fads will come and go. I'm a fan of Eric Hoffer's observation that "Every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into a racket." Assume the answer isn't a model or framework or vendor. Those are prime sources of rackets!

I think we should assume that project management skills will be helpful to nearly every role, meaning we should be teaching it in high school and maybe even younger.

Q11: Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Kaufman: Continual learning is not a cliché. It's a calling. And a joyous one at that! Thank you for the opportunity to have this discussion, Yasmina!

About the Interviewer



Yasmina Khelifi

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Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at [Orange S.A.](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in [projectmanagement.com](#) as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast [Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi](#) to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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