

The Futurist Project Manager ^{1, 2}

Charlotte Kemp

A good project manager is perfectly positioned to be a futurist.

A handy definition is our starting point. A project manager is a professional who organises, plans, and executes projects while working within restraints like budgets and schedules,

A futurist is a professional who assesses variables, gathers data, crafts scenarios and helps to aim a project towards a preferred future outcome, within certain restraints.

Four stages of a futures plan

There is a simple 4 stage model that describes everything that a futurist would deal with in a project.

Stage 1 to Gather Intelligence. What information do you need? What trends, data, constraints, timelines, stakeholders and budgets are you working with? Who are the people involved and what are their values and the purpose of the future project?

Stage 2 is to Manage Change. Change will happen anyway but how do we anticipate which changes will have the most impact on our project? Which changes intersecting with each other will have new outcomes? How will the people involved in the project cope with the changes, or resist them?

Stage 3 is to Describe the Future. This is the stage of scenarios and visioning. This is where we use our imagination, intuition and data to hold different potential versions of the future in our minds, and then decide which direction we want to go in and start to craft a plan to get there.

Stage 4 is responsible Testing of the Strategy. Here we can look at our KPIs and outcomes and finances in comparison to budgets and check the timelines of our Gantt charts. This is where we monitor our projects, or our future plans, to stay on the right track.

Any futurist talking about any of the many good models and approaches to futures thinking, or strategic foresight, will be discussing something that can fall into one of those four stages.

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The tasks of a project manager include all of the above 4 stages as well.

Describe the future with scenarios

Perhaps the biggest difference between a project planner and a futurist is that the project planner probably has a specific picture in mind when they start. There is an intended outcome. A futurist begins a project with a problem question and no intended outcome in mind, just yet. But when we get to the stage of Describing the Future then we see how a great project manager really displays their experience and skill.

Scenarios normally start with our original plan, the intended outcome. A futurist, after gathering the right intelligence and having had helpful discussions with the participants to understand the scope of the changes ahead, will then describe a few potential scenarios. There are many ways that these can be described but a helpful way is to look at an array of scenarios.

The first one is your 'utopian', best-case scenario. This is where everything is done perfectly, under budget, well within the time frame, with no incidents that needed to be dealt with. Accolades, awards and rewards are coming your way.

The second is the regular plan that has been created. This is a plan where you anticipate a certain amount of problem issues to arise. Things will need to be responded to, changed, adapted. There may be a few compromises. But that's the task you are equipped to deal with.

The third scenario is the opposite of the first. This is a 'dystopian' version. Literally the worst-case scenario. How many moving parts can break in this plan? How many external issues will disrupt your schedule? How far over budget will you be forced to go to complete this project.

As a project manager you will be familiar with creating some Plan B options, but the 3 scenarios offer a slightly different approach to responsible planning.

The human reaction to scenarios

If we really craft those 2 extreme scenarios well, the best and the worst-case versions, the first thing we will experience while thinking about them is a rush of emotion. Our brains will react to the thought of an award and a bonus with a rush of endorphins and other feel-good hormones. That chemical cascade in our brains will spill out into our bodies and we will physically feel excited. The same will happen with the worst-case scenario. Remembering other projects that have failed, anticipating the reaction of clients to the news that a project may fail, imagining the consequences of going over budget and the penalty to your career, will create a chemical reaction of adrenaline and cortisone. Now your body is feeling the physical anxiety and your heart rate is up and you start to perspire.

Part of Managing Change (Stage 2) is knowing that you and others on your team will react to both good and bad news in a project. What we don't want is to allow an overly emotional reaction to colour how we then make decisions.

From Plan B to a Range of Variables

So the futurist project manager takes time to plan out this array of scenarios, gives time to deal with any emotion that that may get in the way, and then makes the logical and practical plans to deal with, not just the project, not just Plan B, but a range of potential outcomes. It doesn't need to be quite as complex as the main plan, but by having anticipated and created a list of potential responses to the issues that may arise, the project manager can now confidently face the unknowns because there is a set of contingencies available.

Benefits of Futures Thinking

This provides benefits to everyone involved. Not only is the project manager now more confident and prepared, but the team is happier in the knowledge that even when unexpected issues occur, that they have a process for dealing with them, there are tools available. The client and other stakeholders are happier knowing that the professionals involved have a broader perspective of the project and can respond appropriately, that they are well equipped to do so. And for the project manager themselves, this means that more attention can be paid to the present moment, the current stage, because sufficient time and effort has been paid to potential futures and not just to the one preferred path that is desired.

Then we can establish a shared vision, allowing everyone involved to know what we are working towards, why we are investing our effort in this direction, and the benefit of this project. It will be easier to overcome setbacks with that well-crafted vision, and easier to recognise the milestones and to celebrate progress along the way.

All project managers are futurists. Maybe more futurists need to learn how to be better project managers.

About the Author



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Charlotte Kemp is the Futures Alchemist, a futurist keynote speaker who works with organisations to co-create preferred futures. Charlotte is the Immediate Past President of the Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa (PSASA), President Elect of the Global Speakers Federation and is a professional member of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF).

Charlotte is also the author of a number of books, including '[Futures Alchemist](#)' which presents a narrative of how to use her Map, Compass and Guide model to navigate unknown futures. Charlotte also serves on a number of association boards and steering committees and works as an Association Futurist.

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