

Project Management is about Managing Change

Reflections on the evolution of the PM profession from a unique perspective

Interview with Mark Langley ¹

Former CEO of PMI
Pennsylvania, USA



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Introduction to the interviewee

Mark Langley is past president and CEO of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the world's leading not-for-profit membership association for project, program, and portfolio management. Mark worked with PMI's 3 million global stakeholders, business executives, government leaders, and the media as the lead advocate for excellence in project, program, and portfolio management. Mark created innovative coalitions and relationship models including the Global Executive Council, a group of internationally recognized business and government organizations that help shape the future of project management, and the Brighthouse® Initiative, a platform that delivers solutions and insights to successfully bridge the gap between strategy design and strategy delivery. In addition, gross certifications increased from 40,000 to 1.5M and membership

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retention achieved its historic high.

During Mark's time as CEO, PMI has made significant strides in global advocacy. In governments such as USA, UK, EU, India, Australia, and others, PMI advocates for legislation supporting standardized project management practices, improved efficiency, and a career path for project managers. Additionally, PMI's thought leadership offers insight into challenges and opportunities affecting the profession.

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Interview

Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. Your background is unique in that you have been a CFO, COO and CEO. How did you come to project management?

Mark Langley (Langley): It's my pleasure. I'll always be passionate about the project management community.

As to the question, like many, I had been using the principles of project management in the various roles I held in my career, however, the organizations I worked for did not recognize project management formally. It wasn't until I was recruited into PMI to assist them in their global development it became clear to me that whether we were conducting mergers and acquisitions, constructing new equipment and facilities, or managing large IT implementations we were using project management. It is one of the experiences that connected me to the need for and the value of formal project management in organizations and fuelled my passion for it. Even today I see organizations failing to value project management. All strategic change happens through projects and programs (no matter how they are labelled, e.g., transformation). Why would leaders in organizations leave their strategies to chance? It has never been clear to me, and it may very well haunt leaders who don't invest in this strategic capability.

Personally, my father was a program manager for Unisys so perhaps project management had always been part of my DNA!

Q2: What were your thoughts/misconceptions before reaching the world of project management?

Langley: Although there were millions of individuals leading projects on a full-time basis and being compensated for it, there was a debate as to whether project management was a profession. When I joined PMI, this narrative was being propagated by a small but vocal number of individuals. It led to the initial set of initiatives to clearly establish project management as a profession (even though we believed it already was)

and to elevate PMI as the premier global professional body in the profession. Two examples of elevating the profession were the inclusion of the PMP in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the passage of the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act (PMIAA) in the USA. There is still more work to do but a significant shift from my first days at PMI.

Q3: You worked at PMI for 17 years; what are your memories of this professional part of your life?

Langley: It was a professional honor to be part of PMI during this period and to lead it through significant growth and relevancy. I believe the global community we built and enabled to connect is among the greatest outcomes of our efforts. PMI's standards and certifications became the global standards for the profession and our advocacy in the public and private sectors led to greater understanding and valuing of project management.

There were many unique aspects of PMI, not the least of which was the ability to not only impact the organization but to amplify our work and influence the profession. Working with tens of thousands of volunteers around the world, matching passion with purpose and delivering value to stakeholders became the standard for the institute.

For me personally, it is the outstanding people I met and worked with throughout those years. We had strategic conversations, endeavoured to do bold things, and ultimately positioned PMI and the profession at the highest level.

Q4: What changes did you observe in the world of project management while you were at PMI?

Langley: At a macro level there were two significant changes. The first was how the profession and practice of project management evolved. This was partially an organic evolution but also driven by PMI and others. Project management evolved from a tactical and operational activity in organizations to one that is recognized as critical in the delivery of strategy and change. Although not universally, today there are senior positions in pm, such as chief project officer, that have the visibility and influence to support organizational excellence in delivering strategy.

The second change is the evolution of the role of the project manager, and by extension program managers, portfolio managers and PMO leaders. The roles of the project manager initially were administrative and viewed technically through the artifacts of the project such as schedules, budgets, and risk registers. It was perceived to be more a role of tracking details rather than leading the team and accountable for results. The evolution of the role moved from manager to leader to executive.

Q5: What are the top skills project managers will need in the future?

Langley: As we think of top skills, it is important to look more broadly at competencies that include knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviours. In an ever-increasing world of uncertainty and complexity, a broad set of competencies are needed. Situational leadership is essential and there is no single profile that has the advantage in an increasingly complex environment. Project managers will be increasingly called upon to be adaptive, resilient, transparent, resourceful and provide integrative leadership to their efforts while bringing clarity to teams and to the organization

This thinking led me to the creation of the PMI Talent Triangle®. In its initial iteration, I incorporated the results of thousands of interactions with organization leaders, primary research, and anecdotes from the pm community around the world. At that time organizations were realizing they needed more from project management and project managers. This is the same reality I discussed in the previous question. What was true then is even more amplified today with even more rapid changes in technology, e.g., AI and machine learning, navigating the pandemic and recovery from it, and many other challenges.

Whether twenty or ten years ago, or today, the need for stronger competencies that can be applied quickly and effectively remains a priority. Whether its emotional intelligence, one that I consider a “meta” competency, or others such as communication, transparency and integrative mindset, there is urgency today. What has changed is the time to acquire and apply these competencies has shrunk from years to months. This remains a challenge for organizations and individuals.

Q6: How do you envision project management in the future?

Langley: Ahhh, the crystal ball question...

Because project management is about implementing change, recall that all strategic change happens through projects and programs, I expect it to be positioned more directly and universally in organization to ensure their success. It will require them to identify and balance the intersection of business as usual (operations) and strategy implementation (its portfolio of projects).

It begins with the role of senior leaders and cascades from there to the rest of the organization. The c-suite, and those that report to it, will need to understand, and engage with those that lead projects. Surprisingly this isn't always the case today. I was part of a focus group of executives and one unit president said, and I paraphrase, 'why are speaking about project managers, they have nothing to do with what I do'. This needs to change in the future.

As this new approach becomes a reality, functional ownership of resources will be challenged to be more flexible so the project or change part of the organization can utilize the right persons with the right competencies at the time they are needed. To support these personnel, a parallel effort to support career development will need to be

formalized. This may lead to joint responsibility between the functional owner and someone focused on the project career development to meet the complexity that is here now and projected to increase.

Finally, the organizing principle of work will shift equally to the change (project) side of the organization away from the dominant operations side. This seems logical and simple, but organizations find it difficult in practice. It will also address organization desire to have agility at the enterprise level.

Q7: While preparing this interview, you frequently mention relationships. How do relationships at the organization and individual levels manifest themselves in the business world and what can they bring?

Langley: Another great question! I believe most organizations understand the direct relationships it maintains such as with customers, suppliers, and regulators etc. And in more recent years, organizations have moved to models such as crowdsourcing in areas like product development, raising capital and even developing top level strategies. But I feel there is an opportunity beyond those which both organizations and individuals can place greater priority.

One area is shared value. Michael Porter and Mark Kramer describe shared value as enhancing competitiveness of a company while at the same time advancing the social and economic conditions in the community (paraphrased). This thinking requires organizations and individuals to move beyond the direct relationships identified in say their value chain and to think more broadly about purpose and its obligation to society. When doing so, it creates a powerful set of practices that build up communities they serve and attain more equitable outcomes in them. It may represent a net cost to the organization, but it is done purposefully recognizing all have a higher obligation to each other.

Q8: Since you left PMI what are you doing?

Langley: As someone who spent 100% of my energy on the global development of project management and PMI, I currently maintain a more balanced allotment of my time. Today I split that time among a few areas. Professionally, I mostly operate as an independent consultant working with organizations in the private for-profit sector and the association space. I advise on strategy, operating models, certification and standards, go-to-market approaches, and advocacy. Secondly, I serve on several advisory boards and lend my time to new or young organizations looking for experience to grow and scale lending my entrepreneurial spirit to their efforts. And finally, on the personal side, I balance more time with my family which was a driving force as I stepped away from PMI.

Q9: Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Langley: Speaking directly to those that practice project management as their profession, I want to say that what you do matters. You may not **yet** have the visibility as other areas in your organizations, but I believe you will. As organizations rethink their approach to delivering on strategy they will, they must accept that project management needs to be positioned side by side with its operations.

And remember - do great things! We're counting on you.

About the Interviewer



Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France



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](https://www.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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