

The Key to Successful Project Management Is People Management ¹

Tara Miller

If you're like most people, when you hear "project management," your mind goes straight to GANTT charts, tasks and deadlines, and type-A project managers. These stereotypes mask what truly makes projects successful, though, which is great team dynamics.

After 18 years managing all types and sizes of projects, I can confidently say that the "same" project looks different every time because of the people. And that the most successful projects I've run have been the ones where the team laughs a lot and enjoys spending time together.

But it's not just luck of the draw. Fostering great team dynamics requires effort and skill, and is essential whether you're running a four-week project or a massive, multi-year transformation project. Without it, even a perfect project plan that accounts for every potential scenario can fail because it misses connectedness, which is essential to creating a high performing project team.

Here are four things great project managers do to build and sustain teams:

1. Get to know the group as individuals. This doesn't mean inserting an icebreaker at the beginning of a meeting and calling it a day. It means putting in the effort to get to know all members of the team and what makes them happy. *Who do they spend their time with? What do they like doing outside of their job? What motivates them?* These are great questions for one-on-one conversations, because when people choose to tell you something, they're telling you because it means something to them. I take note (literally) of what they tell me so that I remember children's names, upcoming events, hobbies or topics of interest, and other important details that help build connection. I also set calendar reminders for special events and hold 15 minutes on Mondays and Fridays to send notes of recognition or things that let people know I'm thinking of them. Connecting in genuine ways and forming authentic relationships is what we enjoy outside of work, so why wouldn't we want to do the same at work?

2. Facilitate team connections and create a vision for what "great" looks like. At the start of every project, I ask every member of the team to create a "Facebook" page that they can share with one another to find mutual interests. These are individual profiles with

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details on life, activities, work – whatever you want to share. For example, I’ve seen people connect over their next vacation plans within a few minutes of meeting.

Next, I host a meeting to discuss work preferences, communication styles, and what the group thinks makes a great environment, as well as what does not. This information not only helps me understand personal working styles, it also helps me further understand personalities and values. For example, I tell the group that I’m quick to respond to texts (my phone is a lifeline with three little ones), slower to respond to email, and will probably never listen to a voicemail (thank goodness for transcriptions). Someone else might tell me they work best in the morning, go to yoga on their lunch break, and take care of a parent once they leave work at five pm. Based on all of the information people share, we create team agreements and a ways-of-working document that serves as a contract for how the team will work together.

Pro tip: if you are looking for a simple way to do this from a facilitation level, there is a fun tool called [POP](#) (personal operating profile) by a company called LLUNA (you can see mine [here](#)).

3. Understand why the group cares about completing the project in the first place.

Purpose often gets lost in the shuffle of everyday work. Let’s say I’m trying to help a client launch a medicine to patients. It’s easy for the team to quickly zero in on all of the cross-matrix stakeholders involved and logistical challenges of the project, so it’s important to remind them what overcoming those challenges will help the organization do. How will this medicine help patients? By knowing the common thread of what the group values and what the project will accomplish, you can continually bring that to the forefront when work gets tough.

4. Build in time for “going off-plan.” We’re all human and energy levels wax and wane—even over the course of a single meeting. I keep a list of videos (ranging from inspirational to humorous) that I can pull out when I see energy levels dropping. I have another list of lighthearted activities and discussion prompts I often use. Some of my favorites are asking folks to share a meme of how they’re feeling in the moment or what they’re most grateful for that day. On the surface, these things might seem silly or like ways to push out a project timeline, but in reality, they help hit deadlines by keeping people motivated.

The best project managers bring together change management, relationship management, and project management discipline. They understand the importance of creating group cohesion and psychological safety before starting a project, and of maintaining motivation through commitment to shared purpose. And if they’re like me, they know a project has been successful when the group likes you enough at the end of it to play a good practical joke (see photo of cubicle plastered with Post-it notes).

About the Author



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Tara Miller is co-founder and partner of Artemis Factor, a women-led management-consultant business that has scaled in four years to over 50 consultants serving 15+ pharma/biotech companies. Tara has a reputation for building sustainable operations from the ground up, and instilling discipline and structure in ambiguous and chaotic project environments. As a portfolio, program and project-management practitioner, Tara over the course of her career has delivered more than 40 transformational projects, including at least 10 product launches and 7 innovation incubators. Tara can be contacted at tara.miller@artemisfactor.com. To learn more, visit <https://artemisfactor.com/>