

Sell your Horse:

Developing your Influence Skills for Project Success^{1, 2}

**Alfonso Bucero, MSc, PMP, PMI-RMP, PMI Fellow
Managing Partner, BUCERO PM Consulting, Spain**

Abstract

If you want to be successful as a project manager, or to make a positive impact on your projects, you need to become a person of influence. Your success will depend on your ability to influence your project stakeholders positively. This paper will help you to discover your influence skills. Why to write about influence? Over the years I managed different projects and without being conscious of I influenced many people indirectly through my behaviors, actions and decisions. Persuading people to satisfy my requirements as a project manager was a difficult task for me when I started as a project management practitioner.

Some years later I understood that everyone is an influencer of other people. It does not matter who you are or what your occupation is. You don't have to be in a high-profile occupation to be a person of influence. In fact, if your life in any way connects with other people, you are an influencer. Everything you do in your job, at home, with your colleagues and friends has an impact on the lives of other people.

Introduction

Then you, as a project manager influence all your project stakeholders. In fact if you want to be successful as a project manager or to make a positive impact on your projects, you need to become a person of influence. Without influence, there is no success. For example, if you are a project manager you need to be able to influence your project stakeholders. Your success will depend on your ability to influence your team members positively. No matter what your professional or personal goals are in life or what you want to accomplish, you can achieve them faster, you can be more effective, and the contribution you make can be longer lasting if you learn how to become a person of influence.

¹ Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally published in the 2013 PMI Global Congress Proceedings, Istanbul, Turkey It is republished here with the author's permission.

² How to cite this paper: Bucero, A. (2023, 2013). Sell your Horse: Developing your Influence Skills for Project Success; Originally published in 2013 PMI Global Congress Proceedings, Istanbul, Turkey; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue VI, June 2023.

Most of you know that the project manager needs to influence without authority in order to achieve the project success. However, influence is invisible because it is about how people think. We cannot see the people's thoughts. Thoughts drive behavior which 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.

In my opinion *thinking like an influencer* is the first and most important step to becoming an influencer 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.

Your influence is not the same with all people

I have observed that influence is very curious. Even though an impact in almost everyone around us, our level of influence is not the same with everyone. For example, when you have a team meeting with your team members and you present an idea to them or make a suggestion, do they all respond in the same way? Of course not. One person may think all your ideas are inspired. Another may view everything you say with skepticism. You can identify which one you have to influence with. On the other hand, that idea presented by an executive to the same person may be accepted better.

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

We are influenced by what we see. For instance, no matter what I tell to my children to do, their natural inclination is to follow what they see you're doing. For most people, if they perceive that you are positive and trustworthy and have admirable qualities, then 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.

When you attend PMI Congresses and you meet people who do not know you, at first you have **no influence** with them at all. If someone they trust introduces you to them and gives you an endorsement, then you can temporarily "borrow" some of that person's influence. They will assume that you are credible until they get to know you. 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 want to make a really significant impact on the lives of other people, you have to do it up close. And that brings you to the second level of influence: **motivating**. You motivate people when

you encourage them and communicate with them on an emotional level. The process creates a bridge between you and them and builds up their confidence and sense of self-worth. For instance, I always encourage people at professional congresses to participate and present their experiences in front of others.

I consider the third level of influence is: **mentoring**. That means listen to people's requirements and problems. You probably will not be able to solve their problems immediately but at least you could share similar experiences with them. Your positivism here is so crucial for me.

The fourth level of influence is: **multiplying**. The highest level of influence you can have in other's lives is the multiplication level. As a multiplying influencer, you help people you are influencing to become positive influencers in the lives of others and pass not only what they have received from you, but also what they have learned and gleaned on their own. Few people ever make it to this influence level, but everyone has the potential to do so. You can be a model to the masses, but to go the higher levels of influence, you have to work with individuals. What you say and, more important, what you do is a model for those who follow you.

Positive influencers add value to other people. I don't know what kind of influence you have on others today as you read this paper. Your actions may touch the lives of hundreds of people, or perhaps you may influence two or three team members or colleagues. The number of people is not what is most important. The key point is to remember that your level of influence is not static. 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 person of high influence. You can have an incredibly positive impact on the lives of others. You can add high value to them.

I don't know exactly what your dream is in life or what kind of legacy you want to leave. But if you want to make an impact, you will have to become a man or woman capable of influencing others.

The horse story

Since several years ago I have been telling my horse story every time I needed to convince somebody about the power of your project management beliefs. Only when you believe in something will you be able to sell it. I used that joke and I'm still using it with my customers, colleagues and peers. I try to be contagious about my passion telling that joke and I think I did it many times. However, I was not conscious about how I am influencing people when using that story over the years. 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 my horse story: Let's imagine a gipsy man who wants to sell a horse to a Spanish man, and the gipsy man says: "I want to sell you a horse". The Spanish man answer him: "I don't need any horse".



Oh yes, you need it, says the gipsy man, you have some children and a wife. This horse is waking up very early in the morning, preparing all the work at home, going to the supermarket to buy the necessary food and when you come back in the evening everything is done. This is a fantastic horse, you need to buy it. I don't believe you gipsy man, but I'll buy that horse. So, the Spanish man buys the horse and two months later the gipsy man and the Spanish man meet each other again, and the Spanish man says to the gipsy man: "this is an awful horse, it is bothering my neighbors at 3:00 a.m., it is kicking my children every day; I hate that

horse, please go away with that horse. The gipsy man smiles and say to the Spanish man: "talk about the horse that way and you will not be able to sell it again".

When I analyzed my story over the years, I discovered that I was influencing the project managers and executives behaviors in my talks and presentations, using my horse story. I have been well-known for my positive attitude when managing projects. What I learned is that every one of us is influencing people every day, but we are not conscious of that 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 (prepare the horse) if you want to be able to sell it (sell the horse). My personal best practice is being very careful about the words and expressions we use in front of people. In some cultures, because of my enthusiasm and the Spanish jokes I use I was considered a clown, instead of understanding my sense of humor to attract and encourage people.

I tried to sell many horses in my life and I needed to understand the type of individual that would ride the horse. I learned that it is culture dependent also but most of the people understood my message in my first try.

Definitions

There are several definitions of influence:

- A power affecting a person, thing, or course of events, especially one that operates without any direct or apparent effort.
- The power to sway or affect based on prestige, wealth, ability, or position.
- A determining factor believed by some to affect individual tendencies and characteristics understood to be caused by the positions of the stars and planets at the time of one's birth.

- The capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behavior of someone or something, or the effect itself.

My definition is the power of achieving things through other people. The project manager has the power to influence their team members and stakeholders, but he/she needs to develop that skill to be more and more successful. The project manager needs to influence people to achieve project results maintaining high morale, teamwork and courage.

Influence versus persuasion

Persuasion is important, but dangerous. If you persuade someone the wrong way, you lose influence. We have all been victims of salespeople, colleagues or bosses who use great persuasion techniques to make us do something we later regret.

And next time we see that person, we know not to trust them. They can use the tricks of persuasion to fool us once, but we will not be fooled again. This paper shows how you can persuade and build influence at the same time: instead of avoiding you, people will want to work with you more. But you must persuade them the right way.

Influencers play for much higher stakes than persuaders. Influencers do not want to be successful only one time. They want to build commitment which lasts. This means that influencers think and act very differently from persuaders. Persuaders start and finish with their own needs. They want to sell their product or plant their idea in another person’s head. Communication tends to be one way: the persuader does most of the talking as he or she extols the virtues of the product or idea they want to push. Influencers still have goals to achieve but think differently about how to get there. They see the world through other people’s eyes and adapt their message and behavior accordingly. The ideal outcome is not simply to persuade someone, it is to build an alliance of mutual trust and respect. Achieving this takes a lot of time, effort and skill. But it is a great investment which yields rich dividends over a long period.

What are the differences between influence and persuasion? See the table below:

PERSUASION	INFLUENCE
Transaction	Relationship
Win-lose	Win-win
Competitive	Collaborative
One-off-event	Permanent
Zero sum game	One plus one equals two
Short term goals	Long term goals
Me versus you	We
See my own needs only	See each other’s needs
Kills trust	Builds trust

Exhibit 2 –Difference between persuasion and influence

Persuasion is the here and now skill we have to learn. Influence is our investment in the future. As a project manager you are going to have to deal with someone regularly, it pays to learn influence and persuasion. Most project practitioners know that effective persuasion is necessary for project success but it is a difficult and time consuming proposition, but it may also be more powerful than the command-and-control managerial model it succeeds.

I understand persuasion as the language of business leadership. In my particular experience, as a project manager, I use logic, persistence and passion to get others to buy a good idea and many times I failed.

What, then, constitutes effective persuasion? I understand persuasion as learning and negotiating process, then it involves phases of discovery, preparation and dialogue. Getting ready to persuade team members and other project stakeholders can take weeks or months of planning, as you learn about your audience and the position you intend to argue. I have observed effective persuaders consider their positions from every angle.

Some of the questions we need to answer to be an effective persuader are as follows:

- What investments in time and money will my position require from others?
- Is my supporting evidence weak in any way?
- Are there alternative positions I need to examine?

Dialogue happens before and during the persuasion process. Before the process begins, effective persuaders use dialogue to learn more about their audience's opinions, concerns, and perspectives. During the process, dialogue continues to be a form of learning, but it is also the beginning of the negotiation stage. You invite people to discuss, even debate, the merits of your position, and then to offer honest feedback and suggest alternative solutions.

That may sound like a slow way to achieve your goal, but effective persuasion is about testing and revising ideas in concert with your colleagues' concerns and needs. In fact, the best persuaders not only listen to others but also incorporate their perspectives into a shared solution.

Persuasion often involves - indeed, demands - compromise. Perhaps that is why the most effective persuaders are open-minded, never dogmatic. They enter the persuasion process prepared to adjust their viewpoints and incorporate other's ideas. When team members, colleagues and other project stakeholders see that a persuader is eager to hear their views and willing to make changes in response to their needs and concerns, they respond very positively. They trust the persuader more and listen more attentively. They don't fear being bowled over or manipulated. They see the persuader as flexible and are thus more willing to make sacrifices themselves.

Effective persuasion involves four distinct and essential steps:

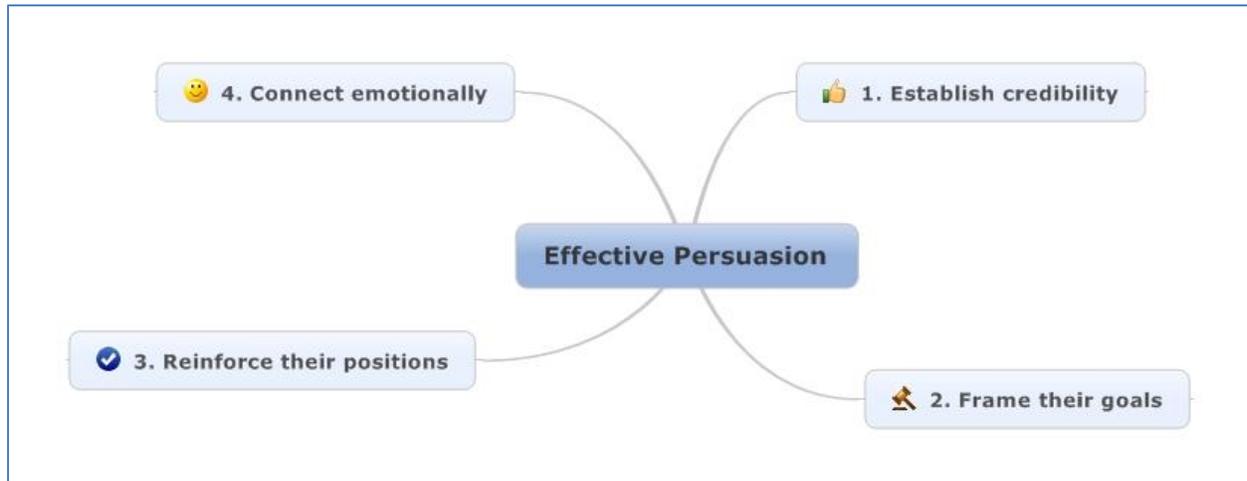


Exhibit 3 –Steps to follow to achieve effective persuasion

1. **Establish Credibility**: Practice authenticity and integrity. I mean say what you believe and act on what you say (Randall L. Englund - Creating an environment for successful projects book). Achieve the commitments you agreed with your customers. Some examples are: promising to send a project status report on a determined date and doing it, promising to deliver a project deliverable on a date and doing it.

2. **Frame their goals in a way that identifies common ground with those they intend to persuade**: Even if your credibility is high, your position must still appeal strongly to the people you are trying to persuade. Effective persuaders must be adept at describing their positions in terms that illuminate their advantages. The way is identifying shared benefits.

3. **Reinforce their positions using vivid language and compelling evidence**: With credibility established and a common frame identified, persuasion becomes a matter of presenting evidence. Effective persuaders supplement numerical data with examples, stories, metaphors, and analogies to make their positions come alive. That use of language paints a vivid word picture and, doing so, lends a compelling and tangible quality to the persuader's point of view.

4. **Connect emotionally with their project stakeholders**: Good persuaders are aware of the primacy of emotions and are responsive to them in two important ways. First they show their own emotional commitment to the position they are advocating. However, if you act too emotional, people may doubt your clear headiness.

As a project manager, one of the powerful lessons I learned about persuasion over the years is that there's just as much strategy in how you present your position as in the position itself. I would say the strategy of presentation is the more critical. Persuasion for me is not convincing and selling but learning and negotiating. Furthermore, it needs to be seen as an art form that requires commitment and practice.

The basics of influence

I would like to share with you four ways of influential thinking as a project manager:

1. Be ambitious
2. Walk in other people's shoes
3. Develop commitment
4. Start at the end

Be ambitious: Lack of ambition is a recipe for a quiet life in the backwaters of under-achievement. For many project managers, the greatest barrier to success is in their heads. They accept low expectations for themselves. Low expectations are always self-fulfilling. Ambitious project managers have high expectations of themselves and others. They reach for the stars. Even if they fail and only reach the moon, they will be far ahead of others whose expectations reach no further than next year's beach vacation. The world has never been changed by unambitious project managers. Ambitious people are not satisfied with the status quo. They want to change things and make things happen. Ambition which is all "*me, me, and me*" is not influential.

It leads to conflict and fails to build networks of trust and support among your team and other project stakeholders. Ambition which is "*we...we...we*" is influential. It stretches people and teams and builds commitment and camaraderie. The mindset of ambition is focused on opportunity and positive attitude.

Sometimes ambition makes influential people uncomfortable to work with. They can be driven in a way that less influential people find intimidating. They often appear to be unreasonable: they will stretch people and ask them to do more than they thought possible. Stretching people can build, not wreck, relationships. When people are stretched, they grow and develop and are proud of what they have achieved. That builds loyalty to the person that led them to exceed their own expectations. Stretch is ineffective when it leads to stress, not pressure. The great dividing line between stress and pressure is control: people under pressure who still have control over their face can perform exceptionally well. People under pressure who have no control over events quickly discover stress and burnout.

Walk in other people's shoes: I have seen some project managers think they are the Centre of the universe. Influencers may also think that they are the Centre of the universe, but they do not always show it. So, you need to work hard to see the world through the eyes of each person you want to influence. As a project manager I was always asking myself difficult questions:

- a. Why should this person want to talk to me?
- b. Why should this person want to follow or support me?
- c. What does he want, what does he not want – how can I use that to my advantage?
- d. How can I find out more about this person?
- e. What other choices do I have, why should him prefer my way?

Walking in other people's shoes is not about being nice to other people, or even agreeing with them. It is about understanding them. Once we understand someone, we can start to play their tune. The core skill for walking in other people's shoes is very simple: listen to them but listen actively. Good influencers have two ears and one mouth and use them in that proportion. We can only understand other people if we listen to them. Given that most people enjoy talking about their favorite subject, themselves, the simple act of listening builds rapport at the same time as building our knowledge of the people we want to influence.

Develop commitment: The commitment mindset is central to the world of influence, not control. The control mindset likes hierarchy: power comes from position. This makes it very limiting: the control mindset does not reach beyond the barriers of the hierarchy to make things happen outside a limited range of control. The controlling mindset is enabled by the organization, but also limited by it. The controlling mindset thinks that commitment is a one-way street: anyone lower in the organization must show commitment to people higher in the organization. Teamwork for a controlling manager means "My way or no way": if you do not obey then you are not a good team player.

The commitment mindset is not constrained by hierarchy or by the formal limitations of power. The commitment mindset builds a network of informal alliances which enables the influencer to achieve things far beyond the dreams of the controlling mindset. Commitment is a two-way street based on mutual obligations. Building commitment takes time and skill. Influencers do not expect to build trusted partnerships overnight. These things take time. But once built, such partnerships can pay dividends for a lifetime.

There is a hard edge to the commitment mindset. The influencer may be generous, reliable, committed and adaptable in the quest to build trusted partnerships.

But the influencer is always expecting something in return and sets that expectation from the start of the relationship. Partnership means give and take. Bowing to the wishes of other people is the road of popularity and to weakness. Influencers learn that trust and respect are more valuable currencies than popularity.

Start at the end: Influential people start at the end. They work out the desired goal and then work back from there. They map the journey from the destination back to today. If we start from where we are, we may decide that our goal is not achievable. If we start at the end, the only question we should ask is "how do we get there?" not "can we get there?"

Starting at the end is a mindset which consistently drives different and more effective behavior. It is focused on the future not the past; on action not analysis; and on outcomes not on process. The mindset shows itself in the questions asked in common day-to-day situations:

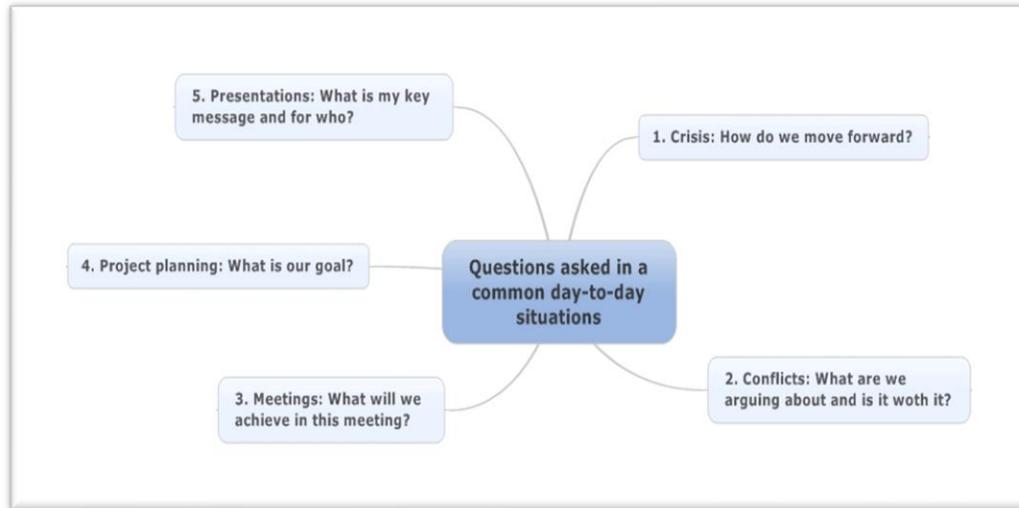


Exhibit 4 – Questions asked in common day-to-day situations

- Crisis: “how do we move forward?” not “what went wrong and who can I blame”
- Conflicts: “what are we arguing about and is it worth it?” not “how do I win”
- Meetings: “what will we achieve in this meeting” not “what is the formal agenda?”
- Project planning: “what is our goal?” not “what is the process and where the risk log is?”
- Presentations: “what is my key message and for who?” not “can we prepare another 50 PowerPoint slides, just in case we get a question?”

Starting at the end requires firmness about the goals but flexibility about the means. This flexibility makes it much easier to adapt to other people and to build commitment. People who are stuck in the control way of thinking lack such flexibility: they hope that strict compliance with a process will yield the right outcome. They use the same map, whatever their journey may be. However hard they run, they never make progress: they simply cover the same course faster. Starting at the end ensures the influencer chooses a worthwhile destination.

Learn how to influence and persuade

I never found any recipe which allows you to create a magic potion called influence and persuasion. Instead, you can learn a range of skills and techniques. You do not have to learn them all at once. My best practice is to try one skill at a time. Each skill will make you a better influencer and a better persuader. Learn all of them, and you will acquire a sort of magic in which people appear to be willing to follow you. This paper is a guide for you. I learned from experience more than anything else. So this guide is the help you need to start experimenting with.

This paper is oriented for practicing project managers and executives who need to cope with the daily reality of dealing with difficult team members, colleagues, executives and other project stakeholders.

Each skill is the product of constant trial and error. I illustrate both the features and successes. The failures are important. If you can avoid the many pitfalls that I fell into in the course of working on this book, then that will save you considerable pain. Each of the skills is illustrated with real life examples. The good news is that you do not have to follow a script to be influential or persuasive. You can be yourself with your own unique style. But behind that style is a rigorous set of skills, structures and ways of thinking which enable you to succeed. Enjoy your reading, ask questions yourself and give me feedback about this book, if you want to. I hope to influence you in some way and also receive some feedback from you when you finish your reading. Everybody can influence somebody.

Summary

I don't know exactly what your dream is in life as a project manager, or what kind of legacy you want to leave. But if you want to make an impact, you will have to become a man or woman capable of influencing others. In my opinion there is no other way of effectively touching people's lives. And if you become a person of influence, then maybe someday when other people write down the names of those who made a difference in their lives, your name just might be on the list.

In conclusion I would like to share some of my best practices with you:

- If you want to be successful as a project manager or to make a positive impact on your projects, you need to become a person of influence
- Thinking like an influencer is the first and most important step to becoming an influencer project manager
- Influence does not come to us instantaneously, it grows by stages.
- Positive influencers add value to other people
- Everybody of us is influencing people every day, but we are not conscious of that many times
- If you persuade someone the wrong way, you lose influence
- There are four ways of influential thinking as a project manager: Be ambitious, walk in other people's shoes, develop commitment and start at the end

References

Bucero, Alfonso (2013). *Give and take* [article published by Project Connections –Blog]

Bucero, Alfonso (2013). *The Power of Persuasion* [Article published by Project Connections-Blog]

Bucero, Alfonso (2013). *How to influence decisions*. [Article published by Project Connections-Blog]

Englund, Randall & Bucero, Alfonso (2012). *The Complete Project Manager: Integrating Technical, People, and Organizational Skills* [book published by Management Concepts].

Bucero, Alfonso (2010). *Today Is A Good Day*, Ontario (Canada): Multimedia Publications.

Graham, Robert J. and Englund, Randall L (2004). *Creating an Environment for Successful Projects: Second Edition*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

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 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. Mr. Bucero can be contacted at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.