A Star is Born: Musically Skyrocket your
Project to a Masterpiece
by Kimia Penton

A Star is Born: Musically Skyrocket your Project
to a Masterpiece [1, 2]

Kimia Penton

Abstract

"Do you know that you have the soul of a musician?" asked my first-grade teacher. "No sir," I said. "Daddy says its best if I become a doctor." My father, a retired engineering professor, did not see the value or practical applications that a music education could provide at that time. Thankfully, my teacher persisted, music has been a significant part of my life, and my experience as an Internationally touring recording artist has contributed immensely to the success of my career in Project Management.

In this paper, I share perspectives from my experience of building a virtual Program Management Office. I outline ways in which I am prioritizing my teams' development considering the changes that AI and Automation will bring to our careers. AI's capabilities for enhanced analytics, performance metrics, and automation of administrative tasks, along with an increase in remote and virtual teams, has shifted my focus to the strategic, influential, innovative, collaborative, observant, and adaptable traits typically attributed to creative industries. I provide two case studies: a system integrations project that failed, and a construction project that exceeded expectations. I tie the successful project to improvisational management models from creative industries (Jureniene & Masaityte, 2023), adaptability and innovation (Kerekes & Heletya, 2020), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997), experimentation, team building, and a musician's distinctive approach to the development of expertise (Brown, Sivaraman, Wilson, 2016).

The traits that are commonly attributed to musicians and creatives will become increasingly important as our profession evolves. In this paper, we will explore the benefits of improvisational and creative approaches from musicians in application of Project Management.

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[1] *Editor's note: 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 presented at the 16th UT Dallas PM Symposium in May 2024. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.*

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The Future of Project Management

Project Management has changed significantly over the past decade due to increasingly global, virtual, and hybrid teams. New models of working combined with emerging technologies will accelerate the transformation of the project management role from the once structured teams in the same office setting to geographically dispersed, technically savvy organizations operating in uncertain environments.

According to Gartner research, 80% of today's Project Management tasks will be eliminated by 2030 due to AI. (Gartner, 2019) As Project Managers, we spend a significant amount of time each week updating status decks, project plans, dashboards, and manual reporting tools. Data collection, analysis and reporting will be taken over by AI and will happen at faster rates and with more accuracy. (Gartner, 2023) We will need to adopt new technologies and develop our technical capabilities to support our organizations and to remain competitive. In addition to technical skills needed to adopt and leverage new technologies and adapt to changing environments, the skills that will become even more important for Project Managers are influencing ability, coaching capabilities, teaching, adaptability, innovation, and improvisation. (HBR, 2023) These are often referred to as soft skills or Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence is defined as the ability to understand and manage our own emotions and to influence the emotions of others. (Goleman, 1995).

Dr. Goleman's model of emotional intelligence below outlines the four main components: self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, and relationship-management.
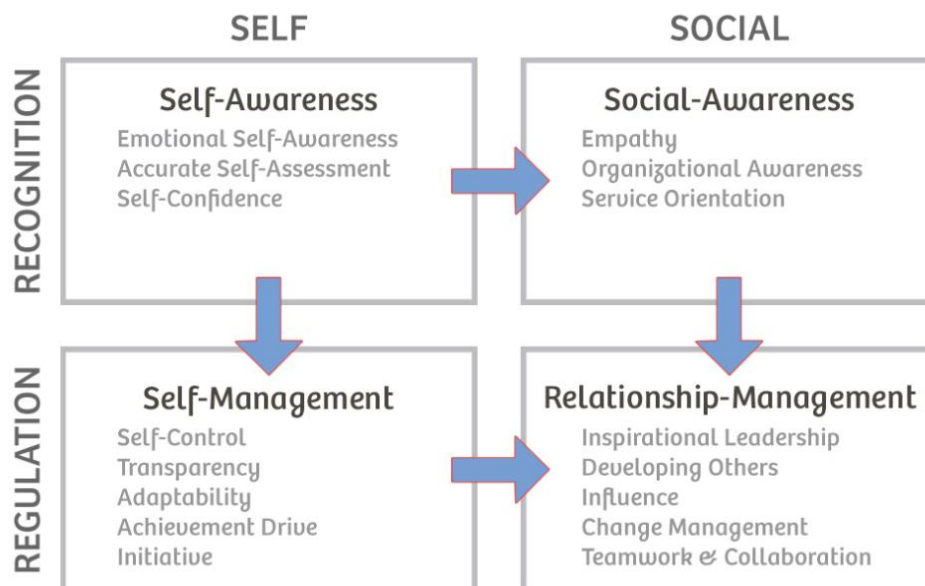
These skills are critical as we operate in environments requiring increased communication and collaboration, cultural awareness and inclusivity, and relationship management. Let's review a software implementation project to see where these skills would have been beneficial.

Case Study 1: A Software Implementation Project

The situation: Customer order processing with multiple hand offs across multiple functional teams were manual and heavily mailbox dependent.

Issues in the existing process included:
- Poor service level due to delays
- Actions were tied to individual team member mailboxes creating dependencies.
- Errors were frequent due to manual data entry.
- The team experienced missed orders and lost sales.
- There was significant overtime expense due to extra hours worked in inefficient processes.
- The blame game, finger pointing, lack or adaptability and pessimism were prevalent.

Leadership decided on the following approach for a solution:
- Bring in a consulting group to recommend software.
- Senior leadership to define deliverables and budget – one leader primarily.
- Fully waterfall approach
- Set tight timelines and a strict budget prior to scoping.
- Plan to communicate process changes once the project is complete – ask forgiveness later.
- Plan to train the teams close to delivery of final product.
- Heavy IT focus without all business users involved.

As you can imagine, this project failed. There was massive resistance from stakeholder groups who were not consulted in the initial stages. The solution design did not meet all requirements from stakeholder groups and customers because they had not been included in project planning phases. Lack of technical skills in the business to support requirements gathering or testing caused further delays due to rework and training needs. The budget was too low, and timeline was unrealistic. After 15 months, the project was cancelled with time and funds wasted and damaged relationships. It was a tense environment and disappointing experience for everyone involved.
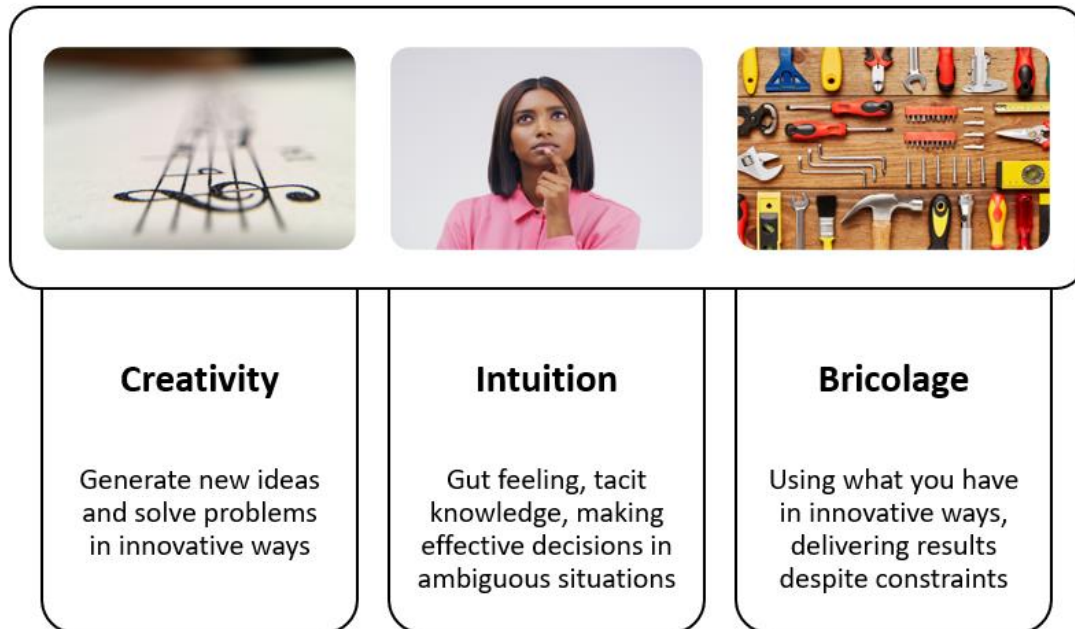
As I reflected on the challenges in this project, I thought of my creative, musical community. I am fortunate enough to work with incredible jazz musicians in Denton and Dallas, Texas. We meet to create new music, rehearse, and perform at local venues. I

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also attend live concerts as often as possible, and I particularly enjoy jazz improvisation. The high technical expertise, collaboration, and improvisational elements of jazz have been the subject of recent managerial studies that highlight key lessons from jazz musicians. These include individual excellence, shared leadership, and an ensemble mindset (Thomas, 2020), high degrees of emotional intelligence (Landry, 2019), advanced improvisation capabilities (Leybourne, 2002), collaborative co-creation through collective intelligence (Thomas, 2020), and my personal favorite, collaboration on music is fun!

One recurrent theme in the exploration of creative industries for managerial practices is improvisation. Moorman and Minor (1998) defined an improvisational model that includes creativity, intuition, and bricolage to enable project success. Creativity is used to generate new, innovative ideas to solve problems. Creativity is crucial and promotes the competitive advantage of organizations (Jurieniene & Masaityte, 2023). Intuition is a gut feeling. It is based in subconscious decision making and tacit knowledge. Intuition allows us to make effective decisions in ambiguous situations. Bricolage refers to using what we have in innovative ways to deliver results. (Moorman & Minor, 1998a, 1998b). This improvisational management model follows the assumption that we do not always have to have a predetermined plan. Action without a plan can also solve problems in rapidly changing environments by allowing flexible adaptation and a decentralized management system (Leybourne, 2011).

It is important to note that technical proficiency in one's craft or instrument is needed for improvisation and innovation. Before we can bend or break any rules, we must be well versed in the existing rules. You cannot leverage technology without first learning it. You cannot join a band without some degree of musical mastery. Additionally, becoming more improvisational can allow project managers to take advantage of changes in the market, pivot as needed and improve project performance (Leybourne, 2007).

A simplified version of the three elements of improvisation (Moorman & Minor, 1998):

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Creativity	Intuition	Bricolage
Generate new ideas and solve problems in innovative ways	Gut feeling, tacit knowledge, making effective decisions in ambiguous situations	Using what you have in innovative ways, delivering results despite constraints

Let's explore the lessons learned from our case study and look at how the application of emotional intelligence, musician-like traits, and improvisation could have improved the likelihood of project success.

Issue	Lesson Learned	The Jazz Musician Effect
Project was recommended and designed by an external team of consultants – minimal stakeholder engagement	Include representatives from every stakeholder group, subject matter experts and process owners in Project Scoping and Design	An instrument is needed from each key instrument group (usually drums, bass, keys, guitar, trumpet, saxophone). Each musician has a key role to balance the sound.
One senior leader agreed to this and then left without getting buy in from the broader organization	Communication, Change Management, Stakeholder engagement are a must. A transfer plan is needed when someone moves on.	There is an understudy or backup for every instrument in an orchestra or jazz band
No one on the team had expertise in this new software/tool	A technical expert internal to the organization was needed to validate requirements and deliverables	Musicians spend years on technical mastery of their instrument – you cannot pick up an instrument and just jump in
The project was an uncoordinated effort with each business unit marching to the beat of their own drum	Deliverables, timelines, governance need to be coordinated	When creating music, the group are in the same key and tempo in a coordinated effort and fully aware of each others' roles and needs
Defensiveness and ego were taking over	The focus needs to be the project deliverables and not individual egos	Every musician is equally important in the instrumental jazz band, and all take solos at times and play together at other times

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Let's look at a different project in our second case study**.**

Case Study 2: A construction project

The situation: A business unit was awarded a sizable portion of business and needed a best-in-class facility for the inventory management.

The proposed solution: Re-design and update an existing warehouse with state-of-the-art systems, equipment, resources, and office design.

The approach:

- Include all senior leaders in original scoping & planning.
- Prepare communication plans prior to project kick-off.
- Include all supporting business units in solution design.
- Bring on consultants with key construction expertise that were missing in the team.
- Leadership tour of all existing warehouses to share the vision and collect feedback from staff members.
- Knowledge transfer plan for all key roles in the event of role changes
- Monthly review of spend, deliverables, and stakeholder comfort levels.
- Optimism and excitement from leadership and team members – adaptable teams
- A culture that rewarded creativity and innovation

The result was a successful project that was completed on time and within budget. The team was highly motivated and engaged, leadership continued to share the vision and reward the teams' efforts, collaboration was high, there was a culture of inclusion with a can-do attitude if challenges occurred. If this project were a piece of music, it would have won a Grammy award!

In summary, our profession is changing. The tools we use in our profession are changing. We are operating in increased uncertainty and ambiguity. To better navigate these circumstances, we can emphasize the following:

1) Soft skills & Emotional Intelligence
- Develop these to a greater extent as you develop technical skills and as technology advances Be a trusted advisors and a coach to the business.
- Focus on inclusion and the collective

2) Encourage creativity, improvisation, and innovation
- Mistakes are ok – they help us to learn and make progress.
- If a mistake is made, adapt, and build it into the music. Keep going!

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- Let go of the mindset that things have always been done a certain way. The past is the past.

3) Have Fun

- We spend most of our time at work. Don't be so hard on yourself and others.
- Don't sweat the small stuff.
- Find ways to have fun!

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Kimia Penton runs the Global Private Label PMO team at McKesson Corporation, a Fortune 10 company. With a background in Organizational Psychology and consulting, she is passionate about taking care of people and processes. Kimia also teaches Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas and serves on the Board of Directors for the Project Management Institute, Dallas chapter as VP, Applied Project Management.

In addition to her work roles, Kimia is an advocate for developing ourselves holistically and nurturing creative outlets. As a professional musician and internationally touring recording artist, she has written and released five albums of original music focused on empowerment, growth, and contribution. She is also a TEDx speaker on the topic of overcoming career roadblocks. She can be contacted at kimiapenton@gmail.com

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