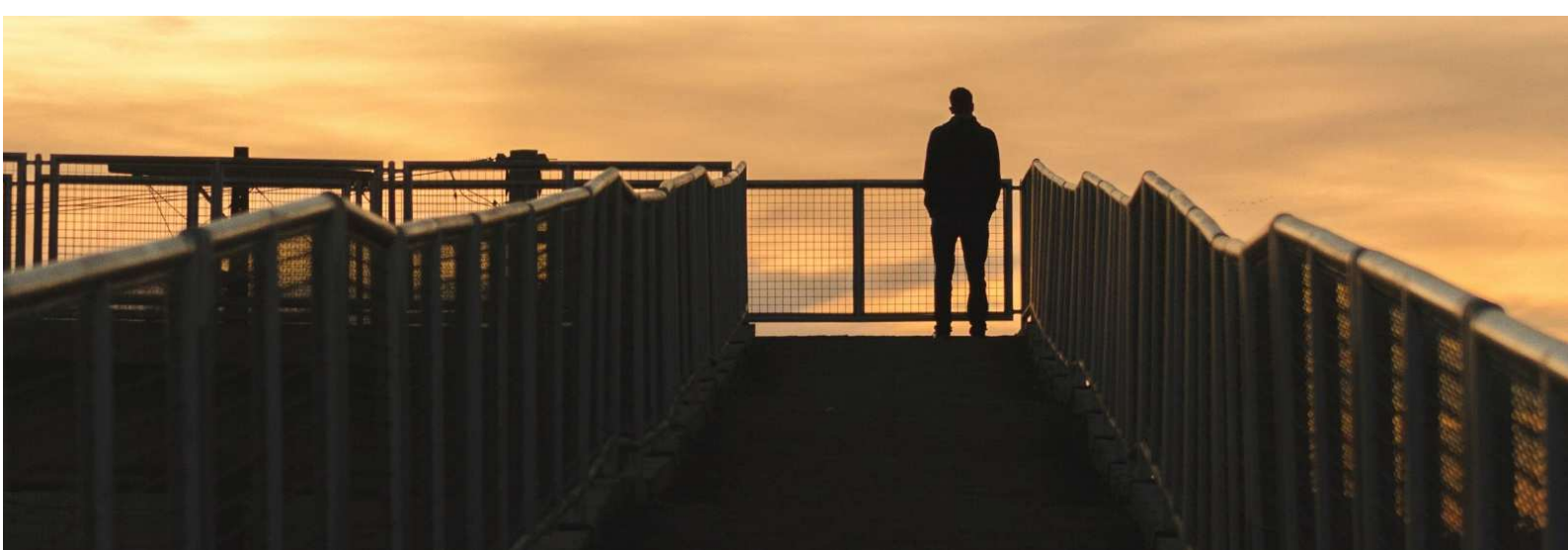


## ***Project Business Management*** <sup>1,2</sup>

# Overcoming Depression in Project Business

William Plange, Oliver F. Lehmann

*“The global deterioration of mental health is concerning. Some worry we’re spiraling out of control.”  
- Jon Clifton, CEO, Gallup<sup>3</sup>*



## Summary

Project business, with its intricate networks and relentless demands, can take a profound toll on professionals, as shown in Alex Taylor's journey through personal and professional hardships. His eventual transformation underscores the critical importance of balancing ambition with self-care, fostering open dialogue about mental health, and building resilient organizations that prioritize leadership, communication, and employee well-being.

<sup>1</sup> This is an article in a series by Oliver Lehmann, author of the book “[Project Business Management](#)” (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis. See full author profile at the end of this article. A list of the other articles in PM World Journal can be found at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann>.

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<sup>3</sup> (Clifton, 2024)

## A Journey Through Shadows: The Story of Alex in Project Business

Alex Taylor<sup>4</sup> had always been a performer in the world of project business. As a senior project manager for Stoneweave Constructors, a thriving infrastructure construction firm, he was known for his charisma, meticulous attention to detail, and ability to deliver even the most complex projects on time, under budget, and at margins that delighted the own management as much as the customer. Alex had built a reputation as someone who could bridge the gap between clients' lofty visions and the gritty realities of execution. His teams admired him, and customers trusted him. For over a decade, Alex thrived in the high-stakes environment of project business, navigating its labyrinthine networks with aplomb.

But then, things began to unravel.

It started with a failed project. Alex had taken on a large-scale infrastructure contract that seemed promising. However, unforeseen delays, cost overruns, and a key subcontractor's bankruptcy turned it into a nightmare. Despite Alex's best efforts, the project was delivered months late and well over budget. The client's dissatisfaction led to legal disputes, tarnishing Alex's spotless record.

Around the same time, Alex's personal life began to crumble. His marriage of 15 years with two children ended in a bitter divorce, and he found himself grappling with the isolation of an empty home. Friends and colleagues noticed a change in him—the once-vibrant man who could inspire a room now seemed distracted, weighed down by invisible burdens.

### The Downward Spiral

The professional fallout from the failed project was immediate. Alex's firm, eager to distance itself from the debacle, began assigning him smaller, less prestigious projects. The financial strain of the divorce, coupled with reduced bonuses from his downgraded assignments, added to his stress.

Depression crept into Alex's life slowly, much like a dense fog rolling in silently over a peaceful landscape. At first, he dismissed his feelings as fleeting and nothing to worry about, attributing them to normal stresses of life. However, as the weeks turned into months, those fleeting feelings transformed into a heavy weight that made it increasingly difficult for him to focus on even the simplest tasks.

Meetings that once filled him with motivation and a sense of accomplishment turned into significant sources of anxiety and dread. He would sit through discussions, his mind racing but unable to absorb what was being said, leaving him feeling disconnected and overwhelmed. The emails that used to spark joy with engaging conversations and collaborative projects now piled up in his inbox, unanswered and neglected. Deadlines that he once met with ease began slipping through his fingers, leading to a growing sense of failure and frustration.

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<sup>4</sup> All names changed

As these challenges mounted, Alex found his reputation as a reliable and capable professional under threat. Colleagues who once admired his dedication began to notice his decline, and whispers of concern traveled through the workplace. The vibrant, driven individual he once was now seemed like a shadow of his former self, struggling silently beneath the weight of his own thoughts.

Colleagues tried to intervene. Some offered to assist with his workload, while others encouraged him to seek professional help. But Alex, proud and private, resisted. He felt ashamed of his struggles, convinced they were signs of weakness in a world that demanded relentless competence.



*Figure 1: When depression creeps in, it is hard to evade.*

## **Rock Bottom**

The turning point in Alex's career arrived when his firm lost a crucial contract, a setback he could not afford. The loss was largely attributed to his delayed responses to client inquiries and a noticeable lack of preparation on his part. This incident was more than just a setback; it was a significant blow to his reputation. His manager, who had once championed Alex's capabilities and potential, faced no other option but to reassign him away from client-facing roles.

For the first time in his professional journey, Alex found himself sidelined. His days, once filled with adrenaline-pumping project management tasks, were now consumed with dull administrative duties that felt unfulfilling and monotonous. He missed the excitement and dynamic nature of his previous responsibilities, which had always energized him and made his work feel meaningful.

At home, Alex experienced a different kind of isolation. The silence in his house felt deafening, and he found himself longing for the laughter and chaos of family life. He could only catch fleeting glimpses of his children during rare visits, which left him with a bittersweet sense of longing. His interactions with his ex-wife had shifted drastically; what used to be amicable conversations had deteriorated into strained discussions punctuated by accusations and resentment. The supportive partnership they once had seemed like a distant memory.

As the weeks turned into months, Alex's health began to decline. He struggled with insomnia—often staring at the ceiling in the dark, unable to find peace of mind—while his diet suffered considerably. He frequently resorted to quick, unhealthy meals that left him feeling physically depleted. This decline in physical well-being mirrored his emotional turmoil, fostering a deep sense of hopelessness. He began to doubt his capabilities and questioned his worth not only as a professional but as a person, grappling with feelings of inadequacy and despair that weighed heavily on his spirit.

## **The Turnaround**

It was a chance encounter that began to pull Alex out of the abyss. A former colleague reached out, inviting him to a networking event for project business professionals. Reluctant but desperate for a change, Alex attended. There, he met others who shared their own stories of failure, resilience, and recovery. For the first time in years, Alex felt a flicker of hope. He realized he was not alone in his struggles and that failure, while painful, could also be a steppingstone to growth.

Encouraged by this new perspective, Alex sought therapy. He began addressing the depression that had clouded his judgment and dulled his passion. Slowly, he rebuilt his confidence, starting with small projects where he could focus on rediscovering his strengths.

Today, Alex is a transformed individual, far removed from the man he was before his fall—and this transformation is a positive development. He has gained valuable insights into the importance of balancing his drive for success with the need for self-care. Alex now understands the significance of recognizing his own limits and is not afraid to ask for help when he encounters challenges.

While he may no longer embody the “joyful performer” he once was—filled with carefree energy and exuberance—he has evolved into someone far more profound. He is now characterized by resilience, showing an incredible capacity to bounce back from adversity. His newfound reflections on life have led him to a deeper understanding of himself and his experiences. Ultimately, Alex has embraced his humanity, learning to navigate the complexities of life with wisdom and grace.

Alex possesses a remarkable sensitivity that allows him to observe and understand the subtle signs of emotional distress among his colleagues, regardless of their positions within the organization. Whether he is interacting with superiors, peers, or subordinates, Alex is attuned to the nuances in their behavior and mood that may indicate a descent into depression or despair.

His keen awareness of these emotional states empowers him to reach out at critical moments, offering support that is deeply informed by his own past struggles with mental health. This personal connection allows him to empathize genuinely, creating an environment where individuals feel safe to express their challenges.

By initiating open conversations, Alex cultivates a culture of understanding and trust within the workplace. His compassionate approach not only alleviates feelings of isolation for those in need but also inspires them to seek the help they may be hesitant to pursue. As a result of his efforts, many colleagues find hope and encouragement during their darkest times, reinforcing their mental resilience. By prioritizing the emotional well-being of his coworkers, Alex has established himself as an invaluable asset to his employer. His contributions not only enhance the workplace environment but also help to safeguard the organization from potential disruptions caused by employees facing personal issues.

## The Silent Cost of Depression in Project Business

Depression affects an estimated 5% of adults globally<sup>5</sup>, yet its presence in the Project Business industry remains underreported. There is reason to assume, it's real number is much higher, particularly among administrative personnel: The physical demands of the job, coupled with high-stress environments and deadline pressures, create conditions ripe for mental health struggles. Another contributing factor is the common "Servant-of-two-masters" situation, when project managers and their team members must satisfy the often-competing interests of customers and contractors. Research indicates that employees suffering from depression are notably less productive<sup>6</sup> and have a significantly higher rate of absenteeism compared to their peers.<sup>7</sup> In an industry where every minute counts, this can translate into substantial financial losses and project failure.

The lack of awareness and open dialogue surrounding mental health significantly exacerbates the problem. Many individuals suffering from depression may display signs such as disengagement from their work, increased irritability, or frequent absenteeism. Unfortunately, these symptoms are often misunderstood or overlooked by colleagues and supervisors, leading to further complications in the workplace. If these mental health issues are left unaddressed, they can result in decreased productivity, strained professional relationships, and ultimately higher turnover rates, which can be detrimental to organizational stability and morale.

This situation is further complicated by a widespread reluctance to discuss mental health openly. Many managers feel ill-equipped to address these issues, fearing that they might not have the necessary tools or training to support their employees effectively. At the same time, individuals struggling with mental health challenges may hesitate to speak up due to concerns about job security or potential setbacks in career advancement. They may worry that disclosing their struggles could lead to stigmatization, negatively impacting their

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<sup>5</sup> (WHO, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> (Beck et al., 2011)

<sup>7</sup> (Johnston et al., 2019)

chances for promotions or incentives. As a result, a cycle of silence persists, making it increasingly difficult to create a supportive and understanding workplace environment.

## Addressing Leadership and Management Deficiencies

One of the most significant contributors to workplace depression is the presence of ineffective or poor leadership. In the contracting industry, effective leadership encompasses a wide array of responsibilities that extend far beyond merely ensuring that projects are completed on schedule and with a positive margin. It involves actively cultivating an environment in which employees feel valued, supported, and genuinely engaged in their work.

Effective leaders set the tone for workplace culture by fostering open communication and encouraging feedback from their team members. This not only helps in building trust but also makes employees feel heard and appreciated. They take the time to recognize individual contributions and celebrate team successes, which further enhances employee morale.

Numerous studies have shown that organizations with strong, effective leadership typically enjoy lower turnover rates and higher levels of employee engagement<sup>8</sup>. When employees are led by individuals who inspire and motivate them, they are more likely to be committed to their work and the organization as a whole. This engagement can lead to greater creativity, innovation, and collaboration among team members, all of which significantly impact overall productivity.

In contrast, poor leadership can create a toxic work environment characterized by high levels of stress, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Employees may feel undervalued and disconnected from their work, leading to burnout and increased turnover. Therefore, investing in strong leadership development is crucial for organizations seeking to enhance employee well-being and improve overall performance.

Weak leadership in contracting businesses can manifest in several damaging ways, including vague or inconsistent communication, a lack of accountability among team members, and a failure to provide necessary employee support. When communication is unclear, it can lead to misunderstandings and errors that not only disrupt project timelines but also create frustration and stress among team members. Additionally, workplace isolation is a significant challenge for employees in project business who are



*Figure 2: Working at the interface between customer and contractor can lead to a feeling of isolation.*

<sup>8</sup> E.g.: (Kruse, 2023)

often employed by a contractor but work on-site at a customer. This setup at an interface between two organizations can lead to feelings of disconnection from their employer, limited access to support networks, and difficulty integrating with either team fully. Loyalty conflicts also occur in this position. Combined with weak leadership, this environment can exacerbate feelings of undervaluation and demotivation, ultimately contributing to a toxic work culture.

programs that emphasize effective communication, team dynamics, and accountability. Establishing clear communication protocols can help ensure that everyone on the team is on the same page, reducing the risk of miscommunication and associated errors. Furthermore, fostering a culture of accountability encourages team members to take ownership of their responsibilities while also feeling supported by their leaders. By prioritizing these aspects of leadership, contractors can create a more productive, cohesive, and supportive work environment, ultimately leading to enhanced employee satisfaction and performance.<sup>9</sup>

## Improving Project Effectiveness and Efficiency Through Safety and Communication

Operational inefficiency in contractor businesses often stems from inadequate safety measures and poor communication. Occupational safety is not just a regulatory requirement but a vital component of a healthy, efficient workforce. Studies show that companies with strong safety cultures experience 48% fewer workplace injuries, which translates into fewer project delays and reduced healthcare costs.

Contractor businesses should prioritize safety by conducting regular briefings, enforcing safety protocols, and creating a culture that promotes vigilance. Effective safety programs not only reduce accidents but also improve employee morale, as workers feel that their well-being is a priority.

Similarly, communication plays a critical role in operational efficiency. A lack of clear directives can lead to confusion, errors, and project delays. Contractors can mitigate these issues by establishing consistent communication channels and ensuring that all team members understand their roles and responsibilities. This approach promotes accountability and fosters a collaborative work environment, both of which contribute to improved project outcomes.

Another significant aspect to consider is the way project managers perceive their roles in customer projects, especially in viewing themselves as managers of profit centers. This mindset encompasses not only their responsibility for delivering results but also their obligation to ensure the well-being and morale of their team members. Often, these team members are involved in multiple projects simultaneously, which can lead to feelings of stress and overwhelm due to an ever-increasing workload.

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<sup>9</sup> (Iwasaki, Edelman & Chahed, 2024)

The constant juggling of tasks—commonly referred to as multitasking—can place a heavy burden on individuals. As team members struggle to manage their various responsibilities, they may begin to feel disconnected from the larger objectives of the project. This disconnection can result in a weakened perception of their contributions to both the successes and challenges faced by the team, leading to a diminished sense of ownership and pride in their work.

To address these challenges, sensitive project managers proactively engage in open dialogues with their team members. They encourage discussions about individual perceptions of their roles, workloads, and contributions. Moreover, they work collaboratively with their teams to identify strategies that can help improve job satisfaction. By fostering a supportive environment, these managers aim to reinvigorate a sense of joy and pride in their team's achievements, ultimately enhancing overall productivity and morale within the project.

## **Addressing Mental Health Proactively**

Proactively addressing mental health is vital for not only enhancing employee well-being but also for boosting overall business performance. In contractor businesses, implementing comprehensive mental health programs has been shown to be an effective strategy for mitigating the impacts of workplace depression. A study conducted by the American Psychological Association found that organizations that offer robust mental health support see a remarkable 40% reduction in absenteeism and an impressive 50% increase in employee engagement.<sup>10</sup> These statistics underscore the significant benefits of investing in mental health initiatives.

Mental health initiatives can encompass a variety of programs tailored to the needs of the workforce. For instance, offering access to professional counseling services can provide employees with a crucial outlet for discussing personal and work-related challenges. Additionally, providing resources for stress management—such as workshops on mindfulness, resilience training, and relaxation techniques—can empower employees to develop the skills needed to cope with stress effectively.

Moreover, fostering an open and supportive workplace culture is essential. This can be achieved by encouraging open dialogue about mental health issues, promoting awareness campaigns, and providing training for managers to identify and address signs of mental distress in their teams. Creating safe spaces for employees to share their experiences without fear of stigma plays a critical role in enabling them to seek help when needed.

By cultivating a supportive environment that prioritizes mental health, contractor businesses can effectively mitigate the negative effects of depression, leading to improved employee satisfaction, enhanced morale, and increased productivity. Ultimately, prioritizing mental health is not just a compassionate choice; it is a strategic business decision that can lead to a healthier, more engaged workforce and a thriving organizational culture.

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<sup>10</sup> (APA, 2022)

## Building a Resilient Contractor Business

To successfully overcome the challenges posed by depression and operational inefficiencies, contractor businesses need to implement the following approaches:

- **Strong Leadership**  
Leadership is the cornerstone of any resilient organization. Investing in leadership training ensures that managers and supervisors are equipped with the skills to inspire and guide their teams effectively. A culture of accountability, driven by clear expectations and supportive oversight, can significantly boost employee morale and performance. Employees who see strong, empathetic leadership are more likely to stay motivated and committed to their work.
- **Clarified Roles**  
Clearly defining roles and responsibilities within the organization is essential for smooth projects. Project managers, in particular, need to understand their multifaceted responsibilities. They are not only accountable for delivering results, maintaining customer happiness, and achieving sound profit margins but also for ensuring the well-being of the project staff. By acknowledging and acting on this responsibility, project managers can foster a more engaged, motivated, and healthy workforce, ultimately improving
- **Clear Communication**  
Miscommunication is one of the leading causes of errors and inefficiencies in contractor businesses. Establishing reliable communication channels, such as regular team meetings, project management software, or direct reporting structures, ensures that all team members are aligned. Transparent communication at every level also fosters trust and collaboration, creating a more cohesive and productive work environment.
- **Proactive Mental Health Support**  
Depression and stress are common challenges in high-pressure industries like contracting. Offering proactive mental health support, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), counseling services, or stress management workshops, demonstrates a commitment to employee well-being. When employees feel valued and supported, absenteeism decreases, productivity increases, and overall workplace satisfaction improves. Additionally, fostering an open dialogue about mental health reduces stigma and encourages workers to seek help when needed.
- **Robust Safety Measures**  
Occupational safety is critical in contractor businesses, where workplace accidents can lead to costly delays, injuries, or even fatalities. Implementing comprehensive safety protocols, regular training sessions, and up-to-date equipment checks reduces the risk of accidents. A strong safety culture not only protects employees but also improves operational efficiency by minimizing disruptions and maintaining project timelines.
- **Seeking professional help**  
External help by an expert for an employee struggling with depression is essential to

ensure they receive proper care and support, enabling their well-being and productivity while fostering a healthy work environment.



*Figure 3: Professional help is essential to help employees out of the downward spiral that depression brings.*

## **Conclusion**

By concentrating on these five pillars, contractor businesses can establish a resilient foundation that can withstand challenges while promoting long-term growth and sustainability. A proactive approach to leadership, role clarity, communication, mental health, and safety ensures that both employees and operations thrive, resulting in improved client satisfaction and a competitive edge.

Contractor businesses that prioritize enhancing leadership, communication, and safety—while also addressing mental health—can achieve significant gains in productivity, employee satisfaction, and retention. Depression and operational inefficiencies are closely connected, and by tackling these issues in a comprehensive manner, contractors can foster healthier, more resilient work environments. In an industry where time, safety, and output are paramount, the advantages of a proactive, supportive approach to mental health and operations are invaluable.

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William Plange is a dedicated writer, motivational speaker, and the founder of the NO HUMAN IS USELESS initiative—a global movement dedicated to supporting individuals struggling with depression and helping them find purpose. Born and raised in Ghana, William's journey is one of profound resilience. After battling severe depression and choosing to live in the forest to find healing and purpose, he emerged with a deep desire to help others facing similar struggles. His mission is to ensure that those grappling with depression do not feel alone and are guided away from thoughts of suicide, realizing their unique value and potential.



This passion has earned him recognition on the international stage, including the Caribbean Global Awards in the UK for his efforts in assisting individuals recover from depression. William also leads the NO HUMAN IS USELESS global community, a safe space for members to discuss mental health challenges, find support without judgment, and explore their purpose in life.

As part of his commitment to uplifting the next generation, William frequently visits schools, sharing his story, empowering students, and offering support through donations. His educational background in Marketing from Cape Coast Technical University and Occupational Health and Safety from Wisconsin International University College in Accra equips him with the skills to effectively drive his impactful initiatives.

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- <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann>