

Project management under sail: When a change of course still leads to the goal¹

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INTRODUCTION

Elsfleth's harbor was straight out of a postcard: Gulls screeched overhead above the Weser River, while the autumn-colored trees reflected in the calm water. Between the brick facades of the harbor buildings in the remote village in Northeastern Germany, the *Großherzogin Elisabeth* (English: "Grandduchess Elizabeth") lay ready to set sail—a majestic training ship whose towering masts reached high above the harbor, evoking a sense of adventure the moment you stepped aboard.

1. MARITIME TRADITION AS A STARTING POINT

Around 50 project management professionals from across Germany gathered in September 2025 at the invitation of the GPM Regional Group Bremen/Oldenburg to explore the parallels between seafaring and successful project management. The Bremen–Oldenburg region has been shaped for centuries by its close connection to the sea. Port industries, shipbuilding, and maritime services are not only economic pillars but also part of the region's identity.

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The GPM Regional Group Bremen/Oldenburg intentionally built on this heritage. “We wanted to bring the topic of project management closer to people who may not have direct exposure to it, while also offering our members something special,” explained Irmtraud Behrens, member of the regional leadership team.

This approach deliberately addressed multiple stakeholder groups—a key element of sound project management. External participants were given an accessible introduction to the field, GPM members benefited from exclusive networking opportunities, and the Bremen/Oldenburg region served as the backdrop for an event that honored its maritime roots. This conscious inclusion of diverse perspectives exemplifies the principle of *stakeholder management*, an approach essential to project success.

2. THE SAILING SHIP AS A SYMBOL FOR PROJECTS

Few domains demonstrate the importance of precise project management as clearly as maritime operations. First, new ship constructions and modernizations demand close coordination between shipyards, suppliers, and classification societies. Strict adherence to timelines and budgets is crucial to avoid multimillion-euro delays. Second, logistics in ports are inherently project-oriented—arrival and departure, cargo securing, and customs procedures must be meticulously synchronized for smooth operations. Third, safety at sea also depends on project management, whether in route planning, emergency drills, or cooperation among international crews working in confined spaces where clear roles and processes are essential.

3. PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGE WITH A VIEW OF THE WATER

Participants came not only from Bremen and Oldenburg but from all over Germany. “We had people on board who wanted to network, learn more about methods, and see how others work. Some may even be considering a career change and used this opportunity to make new connections,” said Ingo-Martin Liedke, also a member of the regional leadership team. About half of the attendees were GPM members, the other half project management professionals without membership—a mix that sparked lively discussion.

4. COMMUNITY AND MARITIME SPIRIT: THREE VALUABLE INSIGHTS

In addition to workshops and discussions, there was ample time to explore the ship—from the helm to the rigging—guided by knowledgeable crew members. Sailing down the Weser toward Bremerhaven together created a special atmosphere. At sunset near Nordenham, the *Großherzogin Elisabeth* turned and set course back home. The river lay calm in the dark as the ship glided almost silently into its home port of Elsfleth around 10

p.m. Even after disembarking, the evening didn't end right away—small groups lingered on the quay, deep in conversation, laughing, exchanging contacts, ideas, and perhaps even planning future projects.

The sailing trip aboard the *Großherzogin Elisabeth* offered not only maritime charm but also three valuable insights into working within projects—especially in times of remote work, hybrid teams, and complex stakeholder structures.

4.1. PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS REMAIN ESSENTIAL

In an age of digital communication and hybrid work, face-to-face interaction is often seen as optional. Yet this sailing trip proved the opposite: genuine trust, understanding, and fresh perspectives arise only through personal conversation. Many participants took the opportunity to share professional experiences—so much so that the originally planned group work was spontaneously replaced by open dialogue.

This outcome aligns with key project management principles: stakeholder management and team communication depend on relationship-building. Complex projects rarely fail due to lack of technical expertise; they fail due to poor coordination or mutual misunderstanding. Personal interaction forms the foundation for success. The event showed that social connection and trust are indispensable resources in project work—especially after years of primarily virtual contact.

4.2. THE ENVIRONMENT'S INFLUENCE ON COLLABORATION AND CREATIVITY

The maritime setting of the *Großherzogin Elisabeth* had an inspiring effect on participants. Surrounded by sails, masts, and water, project management became tangible: orientation, navigation, and team coordination at sea directly mirror project work on land. The unique environment encouraged openness, curiosity, and cross-industry exchange.

From a project management perspective, this highlights the value of context and organizational culture. Projects thrive in environments that foster creativity and communication. Whether during workshops, kick-off meetings, or lessons learned sessions, the setting has a major impact on motivation and interaction. The sailing trip demonstrated that learning and networking formats are more effective when they break routine and create experiences that combine emotion and insight.

4.3. ADJUSTING PLANS WHILE STILL ACHIEVING GOALS

A key takeaway from the day was that a project can still succeed even when the original plan changes. Instead of conducting the planned group presentations, the organizers decided spontaneously to continue the lively discussions—a decision that proved right. Conversations on deck, over coffee, or at dinner fostered relationships from which future collaborations may emerge.

This flexibility reflects a core principle of professional project management: agility and goal orientation rather than rigid adherence to a plan. Projects rarely unfold exactly as intended; what matters is keeping the overarching goal—in this case, professional exchange and networking—in focus. By adapting to participants' needs, the event achieved its objectives even more effectively than a strictly followed schedule would have allowed.

About the Author



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Sebastian Wieschowski is an editor at the German Project Management Association (GPM), the national member association of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in Germany. He is responsible for developing GPM's media relations and serves on the editorial board of PM Aktuell, a quarterly magazine distributed to more than 6,500 GPM members as well as external stakeholders.

Born in 1985 in northern Germany, Wieschowski developed an early fascination with journalism. His formal education began with active contributions to school and local newspapers. He later completed journalistic training at the Cologne Journalism School for Politics and Economics, earned a Master Level Diploma from the School of Journalism at Eichstaett University, and undertook professional training at a regional newspaper publisher. He also holds a postgraduate M.Sc. degree in Public Health from Hannover Medical School.

In addition to his freelance journalism for national and international outlets, including major German media such as DIE ZEIT, Wieschowski has held senior communications

roles since 2012. He first worked as press officer for a private university specializing in social work, then for a psychiatric hospital, and later for an industrial company. In September 2024, he joined GPM's Marketing and Public Relations department, where he focuses on strengthening the visibility and public relevance of project management through editorial formats such as storytelling.

Alongside his professional career, Sebastian Wieschowski is also active as a freelance author in his lifelong passion, numismatics. He writes for both German- and English-language specialist publications, and his work has been recognized three times by the Numismatic Literary Guild, a writers' association based in the USA.

Sebastian is a reporter at heart and enjoys discovering inspiring stories and meet people from around the world, a goal that is particularly easy to pursue in the field of project management. He can be contacted at s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de.