

# Project Management – The Importance of Soft Skills



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We are living in interesting times. Social and gender norms are changing, the rise of populism in politics and the emergence of Artificial Intelligence in everyday life. The world of today is distinctly different from that of 20 years ago and most of us are running to keep up. Companies too must respond to these changes, whether it's ensuring a rewarding workplace embracing diversity and equality, demonstrating their social and environmental conscience or adoption new technologies. Companies must keep pace with society to stay relevant and competitive.

Project management continues to advance. There are several methodologies and problem-solving techniques available to enhance the average project manager's "tool kit". We have seen the surge of "off the shelf" project management software packages and mobile device applications that support collaborative working and immediacy of response. But as much as we need to keep up with new vocational thinking and technological advances we have to be mindful to continue to develop our soft skills, our social and emotional intelligence, our human qualities.

As individuals, the way we engage with one another at work is as crucial as the tools we use, and, in today's society, we have to be more thoughtful with our personal interactions. Graduates entering the workforce have a different outlook, career aspirations and work life balance expectations than those of 20 years ago. Workplace diversity and equality continues to amplify as core values for all forward-thinking companies, with work environments being more inclusive, more of a level playing field. Companies must move with the times to ensure that they attract and retain the best talent.

Therefore, employees must reflect this shift within their behaviours and their ability to be empathic and listen to those around them whilst achieving their goals with sensitivity and respect. This is a challenge for Project Managers operating in contemporary work environment whilst under pressure to deliver fast track projects.

## **So, what are the soft skills that project managers need to master to be effective in today's work environment?**

As well as the interpersonal skills that we should all possess; profession integrity, conscientious, positive attitude, self-control, a project manager needs to have proven ability in

- **Leadership** - there is endless analysis and research into what constitutes good leadership but as a one sentence definition for project managers I would state it as *"leading a team, through direction, motivation and influence, to the successful completion of a project"*.
- **Communications** – a fundamental pillar of project management. Project managers must be articulate, able to provide clear and concise verbal and written communications and assured in presenting to an audience. They need to be confident when communicating to leadership or across the wider organisation.

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- **Teamwork** – a project manager cannot deliver a project on their own, they need the support of their team and for that team to work collaboratively in a positive manner. The project manager must be able to facilitate teamworking in a structured and supportive form.
- **Negotiation** - delivering a project is built upon reaching a series of formal and informal agreements across teams both internally and externally; be it access to resources, data or agreement of scope or funding. A project manager needs to be skilled in facilitating discussions that reach a successful conclusion in line with project need.
- **Diplomacy** - by its nature a project can become pressurised and team relationships strained. A project manager needs to be adept in managing relationships, "calming the waters" and ensuring the team stays focussed on the objective at hand whilst cognizant of team member sensitivities.
- **Flexibility** – each time a project manager starts a project they are accepting a new challenge with specific or unique characteristics; technical, commercial or regulatory, that the project manager must comprehend. Project managers need to be adaptable, open to change and willing to learn new things.
- **Advocacy** - a project manager needs to embody the values and culture of the company, they should be a "true believer", passionately articulating the project vision, a cheerleader for the company's ambition and strategic goals.

It would be an easy option for a project manager to dismiss the importance of soft skills in their everyday role or to assume that they are competent but that is a naïve attitude to take. Project managers should never lose sight that they are a prominent "agent of change" and the tone and quality of their interactions with those around them has a direct bearing on how change is received in their organisation.

Project managers should readily seek feedback from team mates and peers to better understand their soft skill strengths and weaknesses and take conscious steps to address the areas that need improvement. An effective project manager can "read" people and tailor their approach accordingly. They are focussed on the end goal but also endeavour to ensure that the project journey is a positive experience for all involved. In a changing world expertise in **behavioural analysis** is becoming a key tenet of the project manager's role.

**About the Author:** Mark has +20 years' experience in delivering complex, global business transformation programmes within the Pharmaceutical industry including manufacturing capacity optimisation, major system deployments and manufacturing facility acquisition and integration.

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