

# What's Your Next Step? The Key Skills You Need to Advance Your Career



BRIEF

To rising professionals, project management might not be the most obvious nor most appealing option for career development. We get it. It's not sexy or compelling. You know what is? Doing your job really well and having people notice. Possessing project management and other business leadership skills can make you a more valuable employee and help you advance your career in ways you may not have thought of before. The skills you acquire — motivating team members and communicating with executives — will help you improve the way that you execute projects and it can take your work to the next level.

If you find yourself increasingly involved in project-based work and want to deliver stellar rewards, you must overcome the odds and obstacles that stand in your way. More than half of all projects cost too much, take too long or grow larger than planned.<sup>1</sup> And about one in three fails entirely.<sup>2</sup>

Leading successful projects without alienating team members or frustrating key stakeholders in the process can put you on the path to professional development and success, according to John Beeson, author of "The Unwritten Rules."<sup>3</sup> Five of the six skills Beeson cites can be learned through training and the sixth—executive presence—will be easier to establish when you're not losing sleep over a project that's slipping out of your control. You don't need to become certified in these areas (or tell anyone you've received training) to benefit.



## 1

**Lead without authority.**

Successful project completion demands that you gain the cooperation of people over whom you have no direct control, including your managers and peers. In the midst of project demands, specifications can change and stakeholders' priorities will sometimes clash, and you need to be able to successfully assess and resolve any issues—without slowing progress or diminishing outcomes. This is a skill that is learned and matured. Training will help you feel equipped and empowered to handle unforeseen scenarios and coordinate efforts to get things accomplished, with or without formal authorization.

## 2

**Understand and maintain a budget.**

It's commonly said that the measure of a successful initiative is if it's completed on time and on budget. Cost overruns and cash flow problems are project killers and reflect poorly on the manager in charge. Learning how to accurately estimate and control costs and anticipate shortfalls is essential to ensuring successful project outcomes.

It takes a new set of skills to understand if a budget is realistic and how to manage a project's finances from inception to completion. When evaluating prospects for promotion, managers favor those who are mindful of the company's bottom line.

## 3

**Communicate up, down and across.**

Communication skills help you combat what the Standish Group has identified as the Five Deadly Sins—over-ambition, arrogance, ignorance, abstinence and fraudulence—that lead to project failure.<sup>4</sup> The "Law of the Five Deadly Sins" says that you will encounter all of the sins on all projects.<sup>5</sup>

Without effective communication skills and the confidence derived from them, you might be tempted to micromanage team members, over-promise and under-deliver for a client, mismanage vendors or even hide brewing problems from your leaders until you've solved the issues yourself.

The ability to communicate in all directions ensures that people understand each other and keeps a project on track. You can learn how to communicate with your boss, to find out what executives really care about and how to tailor your message to them in both planned and spontaneous conversations. Communication skills help you effectively deliver both bad and good news and how to motivate rather than intimidate those you outrank.

Effective communication helps you gain the trust of your peers and leaders, which makes you an indispensable employee.

#### **4** Ask questions that elicit meaningful answers.

The simplest miscommunication—multiplied a few times—can wreak havoc on a project’s timeline and budget. For example, when you ask a colleague or vendor how long a task might take, and they respond with a simple answer like “four hours.” Does that mean that the task will be accomplished in the next four hours? Not necessarily. If that person has a full schedule between now and next week, he/she may not get started on the task for another six working days. Or perhaps the individual can only dedicate an hour a day for the next four business days towards your project. Those three cases leave you with very different time estimates for one task.

Knowing how to phrase questions in ways that extract the information you need to make decisions is crucial to keep a project running smoothly.

#### **5** Manage risk.

The risks threatening a project’s scope, budget and schedule increase daily. To manage risk, you must know what’s needed to accomplish your goals and you need to gather pertinent information and necessary resources in a timely manner.

Risk management is a leadership skill. It’s a smart career move to demonstrate that you know how to account for all of a project’s requirements and how to negotiate people’s time to meet deadlines. Management understands the risks

associated with projects. It's how you prepare for and mitigate those risks that will set you apart from your peers.

## 6

### Achieve emotional maturity.

If you've always played well in the sandbox, you may not need any help in this area. But, if you struggle with consensus building, collaboration or managing expectations—and want to be selected to manage larger projects—increase your level of emotional maturity.

Why? Emotional maturity is one of the top four factors that lead to the success of large projects.<sup>7</sup>

Acquiring project management and negotiation skills isn't necessarily "sexy," but training in these areas catapults careers by equipping you to deliver results in the areas that are most meaningful to management. If you find yourself tasked with leading increasingly bigger and more complex projects, consider it an opportunity to differentiate and acquire skills that will not only help you advance in the short-term, but support long-term career growth.

#### Notes:

1. PMI. *Pulse of the Profession In-Depth Report: High Cost of Low Performance*. February 2016.
2. Ibid.
3. *The Unwritten Rules: The 6 Skills You Need to Get Promoted to the Executive Level*. John Beeson, Wiley. 2010
4. Info Q. *Standish Group 2015 Chaos Report, Q & A With Jennifer Lynch*. October 2015
5. The Standish Group. *The Law of the Five Deadly Sins*. 2014
6. Info Q. *Standish Group 2015 Chaos Report, Q & A With Jennifer Lynch*. October 2015
7. Ibid.

#### Resources:

Donald Asher, "Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't and Why, Second Edition: 12 Things You'd Better Do If You Want to Get Ahead," 2014