

# Leadership & The Project Manager

Developing the Skills that Fuel  
High Performance

by  
Art Petty

## Table of Contents

<a href="#"><u>Acknowledgements.....</u></a>	3
<a href="#"><u>Introduction.....</u></a>	4
<a href="#"><u>Why You Must Develop Leadership Skills to Succeed as a Project Manager.....</u></a>	5
<a href="#"><u>Your First Lesson, Leading is Hard Work. Getting it Right is Even Harder.....</u></a>	6
<a href="#"><u>When Project Managers Stumble as Leaders.....</u></a>	7
<a href="#"><u>The Four Universal Qualities of Top Performers &amp; Effective Leaders.....</u></a>	9
<a href="#"><u>Your Leadership Foundation: Credibility.....</u></a>	13
<a href="#"><u>Are You a Strategy-Fueled Project Manager?.....</u></a>	15
<a href="#"><u>Don't Feed People PMBOK Dogma in a Hurricane.....</u></a>	18
<a href="#"><u>Culture Sensing, High Performance &amp; the Project Manager.....</u></a>	19
<a href="#"><u>Creating and Managing Great Sponsors.....</u></a>	21
<a href="#"><u>Great Leaders are Great Communicators-Honing Your Most Critical Skill.....</u></a>	23
<a href="#"><u>Feedback and Tough Conversations: Go-Juice for Project Performance.....</u></a>	27
<a href="#"><u>In Search of the High Performance Team.....</u></a>	29
<a href="#"><u>Wrapping It Up for Now.....</u></a>	32
<a href="#"><u>About the Author/About Practical Lessons in Leadership.....</u></a>	33

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the support and insights that I've received from many great professionals in the world of project management. I learn more every day about the challenges that you face in this critical role and about the value that you deliver to your organizations.

Thanks to DePaul University for providing me the opportunity to teach project management to some of the world's greatest MBA students and to the many of you that have attended workshops, commented on blog posts or taken the time to share your insights with me about this great profession.

Also, a special thanks to Kay Wais at [Successful Projects, LLC](#). Kay's excellent coaching on the science of project management inspired me to focus my own expertise in leadership, performance and career development in this arena.

I remain a humble student of the profession of project management and an enthusiastic supporter of your career development as senior contributors.

## Use of this Work and Disclaimers

First, the disclaimer. Any and all bad ideas and mistakes found in this work are solely my responsibility. The good ideas and insights are the result of learning from some really smart people over many years.

Now for the use:

Please use this work liberally. Feel free to distribute it, post it on your web site, distribute it, add it to your blog or otherwise copy it and provide it anyone that you believe will benefit from reading it.

THANK YOU!

Copyright holder is licensing this under the Creative Commons License. Attribution 3.0.  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

## Introduction

This book is not intended to teach you about the processes and terms and other mechanical activities of project management. This is a book about working with and leading people who are working on projects.

My core premise is that great project outcomes are in large part dependent upon the leadership skills of the project managers.

As an executive, I understand that great, passionate and capable leaders that also are well trained in the science of project management are the ones that drive great results.

Alternatively, if I look hard at the many project failures that I've encountered in over two decades working for technology firms and now as an educator and consultant, project leadership is always an issue.

If you are interested in growing your career as a project manager and perhaps leveraging your unique insights and skills in broader and higher management roles, it is critical for you to focus on building your skills as a leader.

### **Share Your Thoughts, Reactions and Practices with Other Readers:**

I've structured this first version to help you focus on building foundational leadership skills and tools. I've also set it up to gain your insights and experiences in creating version two.

Along with this full-file, free e-book, I've broken the chapters down into individual posts at my [Management Excellence](http://artpetty.com) website.

If you feel like joining the discussion, [click here to go to the web version of this book](http://artpetty.com) and then visit the post for each chapter and add your own anecdotes and thoughts in the comments section. Additionally, you can access the specific web page for each chapter by clicking on the chapter title.

### **Encouragement:**

Enjoy this book and the hard-earned lessons included in the chapters and anecdotes. And let me know whether you are able to put some of the lessons to work to improve project execution in your organization.

Last and not least, know that you have a great job. Remember to enjoy what you are doing. Few people have the ability to affect the fortunes of entire groups and organizations like you do. Enjoy the journey. -Art

## Why You Must Develop Leadership Skills to Succeed as a Project Manager

Congratulations! You have one of the best jobs available anywhere in the world today. You also have one of the most difficult jobs in existence. You've won the career lottery. Kind of.

There are few roles that have the ability to impact a firm in more ways than the project manager.

### **Project Managers:**

- Are at the epicenter of an organization's strategy execution. Strategy is executed in projects, and an organization's project management skills play a significant role in success or failure in the marketplace.



- Shepherd new product development from the fuzzy front-end to market launch.

- Facilitate the creation of IT and technology infrastructure that enables a firm to serve clients and compete in the market.

Of course, you are making all of this magic happen without the benefit of a great deal of formal leadership authority. This would be the “Kind Of” part for winning the career lottery. Your job is important and importantly, your job is very difficult.

I've served as a Project Manager (in function, not title), managed, hired and acted as executive sponsor for project managers for over twenty years. I've concluded that the best ones are game changers for a firm's ability to execute. They are also outstanding leaders. The rest are administrators.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with being a good administrator. Chances are however, that you are not reading this to improve your administrative skills. Simply stated, if you want to climb the ladder, grow your career and your earnings and increase your visibility as a senior, “go-to” project manager, you must master the very difficult skills of leading others.

And remember, leadership is not for the faint of heart.

***Project Management Perspective: According to a survey by Ernst & Young, 80% of the issues surrounding project failure are people issues.***

## Your First Lesson, Leading is Hard Work. Getting it Right is Even Harder

It does not matter whether you are a functional manager, a front-line supervisor, a team leader, a project manager, a senior executive or the CEO. Leading others is hard work.



- There are no silver bullets.
- It does not get materially easier as you grow older.
- People are complex.
- Leading would be easy except for the people. Unfortunately (or fortunately), people are all that we have.

A wise man once indicated to me that, “leadership is a profession with a body of knowledge waiting to be discovered.” He was right. By implication, he was also highlighting that you cannot learn to be an effective leader by reading a book or taking a course. I agree, and I’m the book and course author.

Leadership is only learned by doing, and by the wisdom imparted to us through our own mistakes. Judging by the number of leadership mistakes I’ve made in my career, I should be at least as wise as Solomon.

Books and courses can and do offer you context for your role, and suggestions for your development. They can also serve as roadmaps and even highlight a few of the more common and treacherous potholes and land mines that you step in and on during your journey.

You face some unique leadership challenges as a Project Manager, and this book and supporting materials are designed to help provide that context, offer critical development suggestions and highlight some of the major missteps to avoid on your journey.

My goal is to help you improve and succeed. I wish that I was on the journey with you everyday, but that’s not possible. However, I can definitely serve as a guide, a cheerleader and a bit of a mentor. The hard work and success part is up to you.

## When Project Managers Stumble as Leaders

The biggest project disasters that I've observed or participated in had little to do with the typical items that we think of in our risk planning activities. With the clarity of hindsight, the big project failures were related to people-issues and in all cases, the project manager failed as a leader.

You can spot these real-time disasters by learning to recognize the symptoms of poor leadership at work:

- Constant bickering and finger pointing
- Too many and poorly managed meetings
- No sense of purpose and no camaraderie
- Executive interference
- A lousy sponsor
- Poor collaboration
- Missed milestones and constant re-estimating
- A "Can't Do" attitude
- A "we're doomed" tone when it came to problems



Is this painful enough?

In one particularly impressive project debacle, I observed every one of these symptoms. The project manager in this case had excellent knowledge of the tools and techniques needed to structure and run a project. However, he dropped the ball on his leadership tasks, and the results were catastrophic.

The project died on the vine of leadership incompetence and in this instance, the organization squandered a great opportunity to inflict pain on a competitor. The competitor was not so incompetent, and succeeded where the other firm failed. The ripple effect of this project failure was felt in the market for the next several years.

### **The All Too Common Leadership Mistakes of Project Managers:**

While there are nearly infinite opportunities for you to muck up the role of leader, there are some fairly common and predictable mistakes that bedevil many project managers. Fair warning. These potential leadership pitfalls are remarkably easy to spot. They are not so easy to fix.

1. Failing to develop effective culture-sensing skills.
2. Not thinking like a good salesperson when it comes to understanding stakeholders.

3. Missing the memo on how to execute an effective communications program.
4. Not understanding how to talk Execu-Speak
5. Quoting the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) in a hurricane.
6. Abusing the craft of coaching and the art of feedback.
7. Being conflicted over how to manage conflict.
8. Failing to connect organizational strategy to project goals and performance.

While this is a daunting list of opportunities for failure, don't get discouraged. In the upcoming pages, I will highlight ideas and approaches that will help you bypass or minimize all of these and then some. And importantly, getting the key failure points out in front will allow you to focus on the positive adjustments you need to make to improve your leadership effectiveness.

Remember, if the last thing you tell your little league baseball player is, "Don't strikeout," the only word that he or she will remember is "strikeout."

The last words you will hear in this book are, "Go forth and succeed as a leader."

***Project Management Perspective:*** *In my surveys, the two most commonly identified critical success factors for projects are: an appropriately involved and supportive sponsor and an experienced and people-savvy project manager that understands what it takes to create a performance-focused culture.*



## The Four Universal Qualities of Top Performers & Effective Leaders

Before I get too far into the details of what you can do to improve your effectiveness, it's important to share my very high expectations for high performance professionals.

The focus of this book is on leadership of course, but when I use the "L" word, I am referencing "BIG L" Leadership and I have a very specific meaning in mind.



I think in terms of four key qualities or attributes that senior contributors in all positions and high performance project management professionals consistently display as they ply their trades.

1. Leadership Maturity
2. Strategic Awareness
3. Executive Presence
4. Execution Orientation

Together, these attributes or skill sets define the complete professional. They are the raw material of high performance and all critically important for the project manager.

Here's a drill-down into each category with the questions that I use to help guide my assessment of project managers.

### **Leadership Maturity:**

When I look at the leadership maturity of project managers, I am looking to see how well they grasp this part of their role and what behaviors they exhibit in pursuit of developing teams and supporting team members. Key questions include:

- Does the PM understand the true role of a leader?
- Can the PM lead effectively without formal authority?
- Is the PM capable of inspiring and motivating others and leading across silos?
- Does the PM understand her role in creating a high performance culture?
- Is she comfortable receiving and delivering constructive feedback?
- Does she have high credibility as a professional and a person?
- Does she understand the stages of team development and the changing leadership tasks at each stage?
- Does she manage upwards and communicate with stakeholders effectively?

## **Strategic Awareness:**

One of the critical failings of many organizations is failing to properly involve and educate project managers on the strategic importance of a project. While many projects may be internal in nature, linking the project to how the outcome will help the firm better serve customers or compete offers critical context for the project team. Questions include:

- Is the PM's thinking grounded in an understanding of a firm's market situation?
- Does he think about his project activities in the context of a firm's strategic objectives?
- Does he understand Voice of Customer?
- Can he translate that Voice into work that creates value for all parties?
- Does he help others connect activities to the firm's strategic situation?
- Does he constantly link project goals to strategic goals?
- Is he looking for ideas and willing to challenge conventional thinking?

## **Executive Presence:**

Many otherwise capable professionals struggle to develop executive presence. One individual that I worked with was so challenged in this regard that he refused to ride in elevators for fear of bumping into one of the executives and being put on the spot to answer a question. He was in great shape. Core issues:

- Is she comfortable relating to senior managers?
- Does she develop and deliver a message that is at the "right level of detail" and that is crisp and to the point?
- Does she exude confidence, even in tough circumstances?
- Does she speak the language of strategy and the Voice of the Customer effectively?
- Does she avoid excuses and focus on solutions?

## **Execution Orientation:**

The ability to work with others to get things done is of course a critical attribute for a high performer and for the project manager as leader. Specifically, I'm looking for the project manager's ability to work outside of the project team with the broader organization and functional leaders to get things done.

- Does he have a big picture view of what it takes to execute and implement within groups and across functional areas?
- Does he work to develop meaningful performance indicators?
- Does he trouble-shoot and problem solve with others to improve operational effectiveness?

For the purposes of the rest of this book, you can be certain that when I'm talking about your development as a Project Manager and Leader, I'm holding you accountable to the same standards as I would any other high performing professional.

### **How to Develop Your Skills and Abilities in the Four Universal Areas:**

Like so many things in life, improvement starts with awareness. Ideally, you work for an enlightened manager that pushes, challenges and provides feedback in support of your development. However, real world experience indicates that most project managers are left to sink or swim when it comes to strengthening their skills outside of the science of project management. I vote for swimming.

Developing your capabilities in the areas identified above is accomplished mostly through time and experience, and is well supplemented by external study, select course-work and ideally, good feedback and coaching from someone in your professional world.

### **Ideas to Help You Get Going:**

1. Seek out a senior level leadership mentor in your organization. Find someone you respect and that you believe exhibits the characteristics that you aspire to develop and engage their help as a mentor. Many people are thrilled to be asked.
2. Use the questions outlined earlier in this chapter and have your team members and colleagues evaluate you in the Four Universal Areas. Use this as baseline data to help identify areas to focus on over the next few months.
3. Create developmental opportunities in the areas that your team members indicate improvement and challenge yourself to improve. Ask for follow-up feedback.
4. Work hard to cultivate your executive sponsor and gain insights into how your projects fit into the firm's strategic plans. Have your sponsor update the team.
5. Change your reading habits. Read something from the world of leadership or strategy for 60 minutes every day. See my reading list on my [Management Excellence](http://artpetty.com) website.
6. Work on improving your meeting management habits. Reduce the number of status meetings and reduce their scheduled time. Always pre-publish an agenda and stay on task.
7. Sign up for Toastmasters or take another program in public speaking.
8. Actively solicit feedback from your team members on your own performance. Learn to be a great receiver of feedback.

9. Practice delivering objective, constructive, business-focused feedback early and often.
10. Tie all of this together into a Personal Improvement Project and treat this project just like you would any other. Develop clear objectives, identify the work to be completed and create a tracking and reporting system to gauge your progress. Ideally, involve your mentor and review the results with him/her from time to time.

Remember that leadership is a profession and no profession is mastered without a lot of focus, dedication and hard work. Keep working!

***Project Management Perspective:*** Conduct an internet search on “personal improvement project” and look for examples that incorporate the level of rigor that you desire. The best programs incorporate a narrow scope, specific objectives and detailed tracking. And don’t forget to find a mentor or coach to review progress with and discuss improvements.

## **Your Leadership Foundation: Credibility**

It's important to begin building your leadership thinking on solid ground. In fact, you need to build on bedrock. I'm talking about your own personal and professional credibility.

Project Managers, just like any leaders are dependent upon others for success. Your personal and professional credibility ultimately will determine how people respond to you and how effective you will be as a leader.

In my book as co-author with Rich Petro, [Practical Lessons in Leadership](#), I compare credibility to a bank account. Deposits are hard earned and the balance builds slowly over time as you prove yourself to be an effective, honest leader focused on developing and supporting your team and organization.

Most leaders including Project Managers are unaware of the fact that they are being watched and judged constantly. People naturally look for clues to a leader's character. They compare words and actions and if those two don't match, the verdict is fast and fair: not credible. They look for signs of hidden agendas, favoritism and gamesmanship.

For even the craftiest of politicians, people are perceptive and will base their commitment and support based on "blink" assessments.

You are on trial every day. Don't forget it.



### **Nine Power Techniques to Help Grow Your Leadership Credibility:**

1. Serve & Support. While it sounds like the logo on the side of a police cruiser, the effective PM understands that he/she is working for the project team and constantly reinforces this philosophy in both words and actions.
2. Create a Positive Project Environment. This includes working with team members to set behavioral expectations for performance, accountability, decision-making and resolving problems.
3. Teach. Effective project environments can be described on paper, but only realized through diligent application of the core principles in everyday practice. PMs teach their teams how to solve problems and how to communicate with each other.

4. Insulate & Showcase. These seemingly conflicting actions are part of the project manager's balancing act. The PM must learn how to insulate the project team from executive and functional interference while ensuring that the project team receives the visibility and support that it requires. In particular, ensuring the right visibility for teams and members is a powerful motivational tool.
5. Facilitate & Make Decisions. More conflicting issues. As a teacher, the PM must learn to facilitate solution development and idea generation. However, when conditions require he/she must have no qualms about making and communicating decisions.
6. Communicate at Just the Right Volume. It's easy to whiff on this one. Bombard your team with low-value communiqués and you are a distraction. Offer too little and you'll be accused of everything including the Lindbergh kidnapping. The best PM leaders work with teams and members to define needs and evaluate and improve communications effectiveness over the course of the project.
7. Anchor Communications in Project Goals. Just as a CEO works to constantly integrate strategies and actions in pursuit of creating value for customers, the PM Leader ensures that a project's goals are front and center.
8. Dispense Accountability Fairly. Play favorites or let under-performers slide and not only will you destroy the team environment, you'll eviscerate your own credibility as a leader. Remember, everyone is watching.
9. Live by the Coach's Credo. If the team succeeds, it is because of the team. If it fails, it is because of the coach. Seriously, effective leaders don't look for scapegoats.

Without credibility, your effectiveness is nil. Most people and most leaders are woefully ignorant of their perceived credibility. Walk in the door everyday with the goal of strengthening yours. Remember, you are being watched. Closely.

***Project Management Perspective: In extensive surveys about what makes a leader credible, the overwhelming response focused on a leader's actions matching her words. The most creative response:***

***"The Do must match the Tell."***

## Are You a Strategy-Fueled Project Manager?

It's impossible to be an effective leader as a project manager, unless you are well versed in your organization's strategy. If you are leading without the critical context of strategy, you might as well be wandering in circles in the desert.

I'll tackle the issue that many management teams are not enlightened enough to involve or educate their project managers on strategy, in a minute. First, here's why you absolutely, positively must be aware of both your strategy and your firm's strategic environment.

Strategy is executed in projects. It's true. Show me a firm that has done a good job translating perceived opportunities into actions and I'll show you a series of projects that lead the way.

No organization is immune from the powerful market forces that rule our world. These include:



- Globalization
- Time compression
- Shrinking product life cycles
- Rise of Knowledge Workers
- How/where we work
- Changing generations
- Constant, disruptive competition
- Growing complexity
- Economy and environment
- Customers with more choices

Organizations are under more pressure than ever before to execute on strategic priorities. There is little room for error. Miss a product development launch window by even a small margin, and you risk missing an entire market.

High performance organizations ensure that all associates can connect their priorities to a firm's key strategy objectives at any point in time. I call this the "Walk in the Door Test." Every morning when you walk in the door (or log on), can you connect your priorities to how your firm is seeking to increase customer value and beat competitors? Can your project team members?

Most people and most firms fail this test.

You cannot afford to fail it. In fact, you must become a spokesperson for your firm's strategies.



## **Why Project Managers Must Be Strategy Advocates:**

Effective leaders and high performance project managers recognize that humans do their best work when they have clear context for their mission. Strategy provides that critical context so often lacking on project teams.

Managed properly, every project is anchored in SOMETHING that is critical to a firm's ability to compete, to serve customers and improve performance. EVERY PROJECT!

The project manager's ability to connect the dots between a firm's ability to perform and serve and the project-at-hand is a critical determinant of project success.

Provide the team with a mission that means something and get out of the way. OK, perhaps there is a bit more to it than getting out of the way, but don't underestimate the motivational power of STRATEGY as CONTEXT.

### **Guidance:**

Reinforce strategy, communicate how the project will contribute and keep team members aware of how their output will help the firm. Even installing a simple piece of software that allows someone else to be more effective in support of serving their internal or external customers is important.

Create more high-performance project teams by leveraging strategy to fuel efforts.

## **But Strategy is for Executives in Our Firm...I'm Not Involved.**

I hear this lament all of the time. I don't have a magic cure for boneheaded, narrow-minded executives, but I do have some suggestions for you if you work around of a few of these characters:

1. Make your sponsor the strategy advocate and educator on your team. Your sponsor is ultimately responsible for project success, and it's fairly easy to convince people with their jobs on the line that it is important to educate the rest of the team on why this is really, really important.
2. Let it be known to your executives how impactful it is to help project team members connect project activities to a firm's strategic objectives. Encourage sponsors and executives to involve PMs in understanding how investment priorities are established.
3. Volunteer to do some work helping your firm improve project prioritization procedures or to develop communication protocols that better educate everyone on these priorities, and you will quickly find yourself closer to the center of the process.



Of course, don't forget that armed with this powerful context, you need to deliver your projects on time, on or under budget and at the level of quality required by your customers.

***Project Management Perspective-Important Reminders:***

*Performance is king.*

*Your credibility must be golden.*

*Strategy is your context.*

*Lead your team by linking projects to strategies.*

*Can you pass the Walk in the Door test?*

## Don't Feed People PMBOK Dogma in a Hurricane!

I did not promise not to be irreverent in this e-book. I'm assuming you want advice that you can use, not advice that feels good.

I've spent many years as an executive working with project managers, and I have a lot of opinions about what makes the great ones great and what makes the rest less than great.

My single biggest gripe is with PMs that constantly preach strict interpretation and application of project management practices in the face of a crisis. They understand the rules and, but they have no sensitivity for the “Art” of this discipline when it comes to dealing with people and people-related issues, especially creativity and innovation in the face of problem-solving.



Inexperienced or unenlightened PMs rely on strict process and metaphorically beat their teams down with processes and rules. These PMs sometimes seem to be on a mission to show their command of formal PM processes, and work to conform everyone and every issue to the process. In the face of project problems, their conclusion is that process will fix everything.

That is wrong.

The effective PM-Leader recognizes the need to manage the people-side of projects with finesse and psychology. He/She focuses on the goal of stimulating creativity in pursuit of a solution, and allows process to linger in the background.

Proper process and practices are never out of mind or out of sight, and management and control processes are not shirked. They are however not the tool that the PM uses to help the team realize solutions.

Successful PMs recognize the need to solve big problems or to realize innovations as opportunities to apply their leadership skills. They recognize that the PMBOK has no answers for the problem at hand, and success will only happen if people are engaged in the right manner.

The rules are tools. So is leadership. The skilled craftsman quickly learns to use the proper tool for the situation.

## Culture Sensing, High Performance & the Project Manager

Sales professionals get this concept cold.

In this chapter, I'm going to ask you to develop some of the best habits and practices of the world's top salespeople.

Yes, I know that to many project managers, salespeople are the ones that promise things that you have to deliver, but put your emotions aside for a moment and learn from the masters of culture sensing.

Great salespeople are experts at quickly assessing a prospect's business issues as well as understanding an organization's approach to decision-making.

A sales pro must understand the decision-making process, understand the needs and concerns of the various stakeholders and generally ferret out what it will take to help a client move from problem to solution. In the process, the sales representative builds coalitions, overcomes objections and helps the organization move down the path towards a solution, and of course a sale.

The faster that he/she can understand how things happen inside an organization, the easier it is to plot a strategy and begin directing the process.



### **The Importance of Culture Sensing:**

I can think of few skills more important for product and project managers to develop than culture sensing. All of the expertise in the world in the science of project management is for naught if the individual fails to take into account and leverage cultural idiosyncrasies to achieve results and drive improvements.

You cannot create a high performance project team unless you understand and leverage the dynamics of the broader organization.

You cannot create a high performance project team unless you actively monitor and manage the emerging project team culture.

## Practice, Practice, Practice:

The best way to develop this skill is by asking questions and observing behaviors. While the questions below are phrased in the context of the broader organization, the effective project manager will use them as she monitors the evolution of her project team.

### Ask:

- What is the organization proud of?
- Who are the heroes and what are the heroic stories?
- How do people feel about the teams that they work with in the firm?
- How does work really get done?
- How are decisions made?
- Is individualism rewarded and encouraged or is the team, silo or unit at the top of the food chain?
- What is the political environment like?
- How strong are the cultural values? Can I see the values at work in day-to-day business?
- How does innovation take place?
- How do people talk about the leadership?
- Is the spirit one of Can-Do?
- What is the fighting style? Can people disagree vehemently on an issue and then go to lunch, or are grudges long and deep?
- Is there dissonance between stated goals and priorities and where the focus is placed?
- Do people feel accountable for their work results?
- What role do customers and what power does Voice of Customer play in the working environment?
- Can people talk about tough topics openly, up and down the ladder?

All of these and the many more that I could keep listing speak to various cultural dimensions that a project manager must understand to effectively execute on their roles.

The effective project manager learns to play and operate within the cultural dimensions to achieve the right outcomes. My suggested take-away is for you to think consciously about understanding the environment you are working and operating in and leverage this knowledge to help drive performance improvement.

***Project Management Exercise:*** *How do you and your teammates answer the culture questions for your organization? Conduct a brainstorm meeting around those questions. Ask and Answer: what are the implications of the organization's culture on project execution?*

## Creating and Managing Great Sponsors

Having played the executive sponsor role many times, I have the advantage of looking at projects from a different perspective than most project managers.

I sat between my senior management colleagues and the project team and learned to serve and protect as well as to challenge and when necessary assert my authority for the good of the project.

I can also tell you from first-hand experience that I was much more effective when I was working with a project manager who viewed it as his or her role to manage the sponsor. While “manage” might intonate some form of manipulation, that is not my intent. Rather, my focus is on the two parties establishing a clear understanding of their respective roles and creating some effective ground-rules to guide their working relationship.

Great project managers help create great project sponsors & vice-versa!

### **5 Best Practices for Managing Your Sponsor:**

1. The PM works to ensure that the two parties forge a working relationship at the front-end of the chartering process. In particular, high performance PMs clarify the respective roles and accountabilities of each party. This is the first step in building trust.
2. The PM proposes a working protocol for regular communication updates as well as for dealing with emergency circumstances. This protocol defines “level of detail” for regular communications and indicates how and when to push the alarm button for emergency situations.



3. The PM invites the sponsor to major milestone meetings, and encourages the sponsor to randomly attend meetings or connect with project team participants. This takes trust and some project managers resist this suggestion, viewing random sponsor involvement as a loss of control. Get over it. You want your sponsor to take an interest.
4. The PM coaches the sponsor on identifying opportunities for providing high-level visibility to the project and team members as well as on creating opportunities to celebrate achievements.

5. The two parties work together to establish a quid pro quo. The PM commits to keeping the sponsor properly informed of any misfires or critical issues, and the Sponsor agrees to work on both supporting the project team for resolution and to protect the team from widespread executive interference.

### **Not Every Sponsor Plays Along—What's a PM to Do?**

This is the section when I generate some controversy. It is common for me to hear complaints about ineffective and uninvolved sponsors. Even the best proactive, sponsor-building PMs cannot guarantee that every sponsor will do his or her job.

My advice is pretty straightforward, but comes with a health warning.

First, work hard with the designated sponsor to try and build interest and encourage involvement. You should do this until you cannot do it any longer and then do it one more time. Don't be critical, but also do not be bashful about highlighting the project's importance to strategy and to reiterating the issues and challenges that require the sponsor's involvement.

If your polite and professional persistence fails to achieve a change in your sponsor's behavior, sit down with him/her and very calmly and professionally indicate how the situation is adversely impacting the project. Turn the discussion quickly to solution development. It's often the case that the sponsor is buried in travel or burdened by other challenges and simply cannot create the time. Perhaps the sponsor can encourage a stand-in. If this is the case, repeat your role definition and expectation setting exercise with the new designee.

If you get no cooperation whatsoever on developing a solution with your designated sponsor, do not hesitate to throw the failed sponsor gently under the proverbial bus.

Perhaps now would be a good time for the health warning. It reads as follows:  
*Throwing higher-ranking executives under buses has proven fatal for some project managers.*

I've had no qualms doing this throughout my career, but I always did it understanding the potential implications. By the way, your project team is watching.

## Great Leaders are Great Communicators: Honing Your Most Critical Skill

Of all of the skills that a project manager needs to succeed, the ability to communicate effectively up and down the organizational ladder and across teams and functional boundaries is the most important.

The same rule applies for your career. An early mentor once said to me that I would be as successful as I was able to communicate. I'm not certain that I fully understood the importance of this advice until much later when I figured out that as a leader, my only job was to communicate.



All of the project management training in the world does not prepare you to communicate properly. Granted, the texts and courses are filled with great ideas and best practices for creating effective project communication plans. What they don't address however, is the "Art" of communicating.

Success as a high-performance project manager is a lot more than status updates and reports.

The best project managers leverage their communication skills to create and reinforce a high performance culture for their teams.

### **5 Rules for Developing Your Skills as a World-Class Communicator:**

1. Let people know that your primary role is to help them succeed through your words and actions. While you and I know that your role is organizing and managing a project and building a team, everyone on the project team is looking to you for context, guidance, parameters, processes and help. People should perceive that the only thing you are in charge of is finding and providing support for others to succeed.
2. Apply the lessons of change management in your approaches to communicating. John Kotter, author of Leading Change, suggests that in times of significant change, the leader cannot over-communicate. While you clearly can bury people in needless and mindless communications, Kotter is right about the core issues. Your communications should be focused on strategy, on the relevance of the project to strategy and on the goals of the project. Start every meeting with a reminder and include it in every communiqué. One project manager that I know includes project goals at the top of every e-mail and report.
3. Manage your questions to comments ratio. I'll help you with the math. Your questions should grossly exceed your comments.



4. Manage your volume and frequency along with the content. No one likes a project manager that talks too much. Few are interested in your opinions on how to execute their tasks. Focus on asking questions with an intense curiosity about issues, project challenges, coordination and risk.
5. Learn and reuse the 3 Critical Questions: What's working? What's not? How can I help?

Oh, and don't forget the most important point.

## **Follow Up!**

### **Mind the Phase:**

There's a lot of good content in the project management literature about the various phases of project team development. The most common framework: Forming, Storming, Norming and Adjourning, does a great job of making the team life-cycle tangible. Recognize that your role is very different at each phase and that your communications challenges vary accordingly.



During the forming phase, you are working to organize disparate individuals and work groups around common objectives while they sort out rules, expectations and roles.

Your constant presence and focus on understanding project scope and the project's linkage to strategy is essential. Your need to clarify, help team's understand why they need to come together, help understand expectations and

accountabilities are very different here than they would be in a later phase. Adapt your style to the phase.

### **No One but a Watchmaker Wants to Know How to Build the Watch:**

Nothing is certain to derail your credibility and even your aspirations of greater glory as a project manager than suffering from "Watchmaker" syndrome. Even if you've not heard the phrase, you know what this is. "Ask Susan what time it is and she tells you how to build the watch."

The fact that you are detail oriented and thorough is great for executing on your job, but keep it to yourself when communicating with executives and focus on crafting an appropriate, high-level, clear message on salient issues. For some people this is a tall order.



## **Close Encounters with Executives:**

When asked to update an executive management group, plan your message ahead of time. Remember the audience. If things are on track, say that. If there are problems, don't sugar-coat and don't give too much detail. Indicate the problem, the potential impact and what is being done or needs to be done. If you need executive help, you should brief your sponsor in much more detail and let her run interference on where the help is needed.

Look people in the eyes and speak with confidence. Most of communication is nonverbal, so get this part right. A good message delivered poorly or a bad message delivered well leave two very different impressions with senior management. Don't shrink from questions and for heaven's sake, don't make stuff up. It's OK to have to check on something if you don't know the answer.

## **Push away from the keyboard and desk:**

If you have the good fortune to work in close proximity to team members, get out of your office and walk around and listen, observe and ask questions. You'll learn more about the true project team culture by observing than you can ever hope to learn through e-mail. If your team members are remote, pick up the phone once a week and check in.

## **No one likes status meetings:**

Face it, status meetings suck. Minimize them. They are only valuable if they are needed and if you are leveraging technology properly, they are often not needed. They also don't substitute as "quality" team time. Use dashboards and other means to update on status.

However, create ample opportunities and a positive cultural bias towards meetings that involve brainstorming and problem-solving.

If you have to have a status meeting, control the agenda like a dictator. Don't allow them to degrade to gripe sessions and don't allow them to become problem-solving sessions. Identify the issues, establish follow-up and move on.

## **Manage the Team P.R.:**

Leverage your sponsor to ensure that the team receives visibility. Make a big deal out of the project kick-off, and communicate achievements and milestones. During difficult phases, highlight the challenges and ensure that your sponsor and others are aware of the progress being made. Last and not least, make a big deal at project close to celebrate and provide accolades all the way around.

Developing effective communication skills takes time, practice and dedication. The first step is for you to understand that success is nearly impossible without effective communication skills.

And remember, very little of your communication should ever be about you and your needs or issues as a project manager. You exist to serve and part of that service is managing the ebb and flow and the volume of communications on the project team. Remember, you'll be as successful as you are able to communicate.

***Project Management Perspective: Great project managers are aware of their communications effectiveness and are relentless about balancing frequency and volume with situation and content.***

## Feedback and Tough Conversations: Go-Juice for Project Performance

I recall seeing a survey somewhere on things that people feared the most in business. Delivering constructive feedback finished a close second to public speaking and just slightly ahead of dying.

Feedback comes in two flavors: the fun kind and the really important kind. The fun kind is positive feedback. The less than fun kind is the one that drives performance improvement and is better known as constructive feedback.

Both are important, and both are horribly easy to misuse and abuse.

Feedback is go-juice for performance improvement.

Consultant and author, Ken Blanchard, described feedback as “the breakfast of champions.” In my opinion, he’s right. How do you get better if you are not receiving good quality, timely feedback?

While project managers are generally not the formal “report to” manager for their team participants, the best project managers are constantly providing feedback. They:

- Praise great progress, innovative solutions and great teamwork.
- Praise teams that are busting it to make things happen.
- Counsel teams that are struggling to work together
- Manage upwards, negotiate laterally and conduct tough discussions with sponsors, functional managers and suppliers.
- And yes, they talk with individuals about performance issues.



Oh, and by the way, you might think that delivering feedback is the domain of the report-to manager. In a survey on feedback with my co-author partner for Practical Lessons in Leadership, most respondents indicated that the best source of feedback was not their manager.

You will want to be comfortable tackling the toughest topics with confidence and without hesitation.

Need some more reasons why developing your feedback skill is important? I didn’t think so.

I’ll offer a quick primer but the real key to success is with feedback is really the same way you get to Carnegie Hall as a musician. It’s practice, practice, practice.

## The Short-Course in Feedback: 9 Rules that Will Not Fail You

1. The majority of your feedback should be positive. Dispense it liberally and genuinely. Don't dispense positive feedback when it has not been earned.
2. The best feedback is crystal clear, and focused on a specific behavior! Telling someone that they did a great job on a presentation might be nice, but it is not effective. Highlight what it was that they did that impressed you so that the individual can reinforce this behavior in future presentations.
3. Effective feedback occurs as close to the issue/incident as possible or Petro's law takes over. (Named for my co-conspirator, Rich Petro, on Practical Lessons. Rich turned me on to the power of feedback as a leadership tool.) The law: the usefulness of effective constructive feedback declines by 50% for every day beyond the day of the occurrence.
4. Plan your constructive feedback discussions in advance. Open with clear, non-emotional statements. Do not use the sandwich technique, it is disingenuous. Try and minimize the use of "You" to avoid this sounding like a personal attack.
5. Did I say focus on the behavior? This cannot be reiterated enough. Telling someone that they have a bad attitude or that they need to improve the quality of their work is not behavioral and definitely not specific. Break it down to something granular and actionable for the individual.
6. Identify the expected change in behavior. A great practice is to let the individual or team help you define the required improvements. Active involvement makes it real.
7. Don't let your feedback conversations be hijacked. You are in charge of the discussion. Some people are masters of turning the table on these discussions. Remember that you own the discussion.
8. Set expectations for change and schedule follow-up. Build accountability into the process.
9. Follow-up. Don't drop the ball right at the goal line. If you fail to follow-up, you damage your own credibility and detract from the culture of accountability that you have been working so hard to create.

***Project Management Perspective:*** *increase your comfort with feedback by seeking out opportunities to provide it on a daily basis. There are ample opportunities for positive feedback. When you recognize an opportunity for constructive or developmental feedback, seize the moment and execute.*

## **In Search of the High Performance Team**

This is the capstone chapter of this book. It's time to tie the pieces together into a cohesive whole and then send you back out into the world to lead and prosper.

Everything that we've talked about has to come together to help create a framework for high performance as a project leader.

Of course, don't forget my earlier advice that there are "no silver bullets" when it comes to leading others. This is darned hard work.

### **What is a High Performance Team?**

Being an eternal optimist, I am consistently disappointed when I poll groups in workshops and keynotes and learn that a majority of the audience has never participated on what they would describe as a high performance team.

Usually someone in the audience pushes me to clarify "high performance team," and I invariably offer up something like this:

*A high performance team...*

*Is one of those situations where everything clicks. People are focused and committed to the project, groups thrive on solving problems and setbacks are just opportunities to solve more problems together.*

*These teams tend to have high expectations for each of the team members, and there is a strong culture of accountability. You don't want to be the one not pulling your own weight, because this team will find you out and either help you get jump-started or push you off the ledge.*

*Members thrive on challenges, are fueled by the drive to innovate in pursuit of project objectives, and are remarkably proud of accomplishments.*

*The team members know how to work together and how to play and fight and then work some more. Eventually, the great accomplishments almost become secondary to work with the people on the project team.*

*Relationships are forged on high performance teams that often transcend the work environment and span multiple companies and careers.*

*At the end of the team's natural life, there is palpable sadness and until you replicate this experience at some point in the future, you will find that all project experiences pale in comparison to this one.*

OK, it's a long-winded answer, but it gets the point across. Working on a high performance team is a special experience. Hopefully, you've had the chance to participate on or even lead one of these teams. If not, this is your goal.

### **How to Create the High Performance Team:**

I can distill down a lot of what we have been talking about to some good guidelines and suggestions for promoting high-performance. And while my emphasis is on the soft skills of leading, don't forget that your knowledge and effective application of the tools of project management play a big role in your success as well. But for now, here's my recap on the leadership piece.

### **The Six C's of High Performance Project Leadership:**

1. Create Context: high performance project managers work to ensure that their team members can connect the project and their contributions to project and organizational goals. They recognize the motivational power of everyone on a project team being able to pass the "Walk In the Door" test, and they work to keep the project relevant. People do their best work when they perceive that it is meaningful!



2. Cultivate Your Credibility: the best leaders, regardless of level understand that people will do great things with and for others that they deem credible, genuine and capable. Great project managers are zealous about developing their own leadership credibility by treating everyone fairly, communicating openly, working to solve problems and avoiding any and all situations that might give project team members reason to question his/her motivations or integrity.

3. Create Personal Connections: along with context, individuals do their best work when they believe that they are part of something and when someone recognizes their involvement and contribution. This is a basic human need, and the high performance project manager understands that the ultimate form of respect that he/she can pay to a team member is to pay attention to them.
4. Customers Create More Context: whether serving internal or external customers, involvement with and knowledge that the output of the project will help someone solve a problem is added context. Great project managers never let the customer get too far away from the project team.

5. Create the Right Conditions: the effective project manager understands that he/she is responsible for creating the atmosphere or environment conducive to success. He/she actively applies the leadership tools and techniques covered in this book (The 6 C's) as well as the tools of project management.
6. Communication is King: at the risk of being redundant, the project manager will be as effective as he/she is able to communicate. Project management is at its core, an exercise in communication focused on managing risk in pursuit of a strategic objective. Great communicators succeed and those that don't master the art, don't.

***Project Management Perspective:*** *Strive to create a high performance project team for every project that you manage. Your focus on managing according to "The Six C's" and to applying the various tools and approaches discussed in this short e-book, will help you improve your performance and establish your reputation as the go-to project manager. Oh, and you'll have a lot of fun along the way.*

## Wrapping It Up for Now

I sincerely hope that you've enjoyed the leadership and performance journey through this e-book. It is always my goal to challenge self-motivated professionals to think hard about the challenges of developing as great leaders.

As I pointed out earlier, you cannot learn to lead from any book, and this one is no exception. However, you can definitely pick up some ideas and approaches to put in play and you can gain additional context into what it takes to lead effectively.

Leadership is only learned through practice and unfortunately, through a bit of trial and error. Hopefully through this book, we can reduce some of the error and increase the trial!

You have a great role as a project manager, and your efforts to master both the science of your profession and the art of leading will serve you well. The world needs more people that know how to get things done, and few are better prepared to pursue this goal than the project manager.

I submit that the creation of a high performance team is one of the noblest goals and greatest outcomes of our manual and mental labors. It's time for you to take your new found insights and hopefully energy, and go out in search of this elusive prey.

If I've stimulated some ideas or even alternative thoughts, feel free to join the discussion and contribute your thoughts. Visit the chapter posts at [Management Excellence](#) for add your comments and examples. Together, we can craft a powerful body of content for developing as leaders and as high performance project managers.

Leading others is a great profession and leading as a project manager offers remarkable opportunities for you to contribute to your organization. The great thing about leadership is that as long as you recognize how tough it is and you humble yourself to work harder at it everyday, you can't help but get better.

Enjoy the journey and happy project leadership!

Oh, and as promised: Go forth and succeed as a leader!

Art Petty, on this 26th day of April, 2009 from Crystal Lake, IL



## About the Author

Art Petty is a leader, strategist, and sales and marketing experience with more than 22 years of experience directing the growth, global expansion, and rise to market leadership of global organizations in technology, services, and manufacturing.



Art is the co-author of the 2007 book *Practical Lessons in Leadership—A Guidebook for Aspiring and Experienced Leaders* and a frequent speaker and workshop presenter offering powerful and practical programs that help professionals of all levels strengthen leadership skills, improve marketing and sales performance and fuel organizational performance excellence.

Art's programs and content emphasize the development of leaders in specific functional areas, including product and project management.

Art writes the Alltop listed blog, Management Excellence at [www.artpetty.com](http://www.artpetty.com) where one of his areas of focus is project management. He serves as an adjunct faculty member teaching management, quality, and project management in the MBA program at DePaul University's Kellstadt Graduate School of Business. Contact Art at [art.petty@artpetty.com](mailto:art.petty@artpetty.com)

## About Practical Lessons in Leadership

Practical Lessons in Leadership offers career and start-up guidance for aspiring or new leaders, and pragmatic recommendations for leaders who want to develop strong teams and drive outstanding results.

Practical Lessons is geared for leaders at all stages of the leadership life-cycle (new, early career or experienced) struggling to cope with a hyper-competitive global environment and a rapidly changing, inexperienced and highly mobile workforce.

The powerful and pragmatic guidance offered in *Practical Lessons* incorporates case studies, discussion questions and additional resources included for download at a password protected page for book purchasers.

Join the many individuals, organizations and undergraduate and graduate courses that leverage *Practical Lessons in Leadership* as a powerful teaching tool. Visit [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) to read the reviews and order your copies.

