

Beyond and before Project Management: How *people-centric* Leadership and Communication Drive Project Success and Corporate Value¹

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it's not so much “what” that matters, but specifically “how”.

Looking to the near future, in fact, in an era in which the world of work changes more rapidly than company strategies, according to the PMBOK [1], the Project Manager is formally responsible for leading the team toward project objectives; however, this definition increasingly understates the broader role that PMs are required to play in contemporary organizations.

In a company, project managers perform a variety of functions such as spurring the project team's work to achieve the intended outcomes and managing the processes to bring about those outcomes in order to maintain efficiency on project execution and creating corporate value: he can no longer limit himself to being a simple "controller of times and costs" as *hard* variables, but the idea is to move increasingly towards a new management paradigm, in which the centrality of the person becomes the key to more sustainable, effective and human projects, combining *soft* aspects such as method and empathy, organization and listening, leadership and strategy [2],[3].

The role of the Project Manager is truly changing: in fact, in the world of dominant companies (and therefore also in project management), we are experiencing and will increasingly have to face a radical evolution in the future, a new transition driven by innovation in many fields such as digitalization, sustainability, the transformation of the market increasingly demanding high-level knowledge and skills, but above all, the increasingly marked centrality of the figure of the worker in terms of a true "people-centric orientation". This emotional component appears to be, from the perspective described above, increasingly rooted and considered important, functional and necessary at a general level and not just specific to certain types of projects and sectors: in fact, the importance of people and their management has grown steadily in recent years, transforming the role of the worker from a human resource to a human capital, making it a critical factor in achieving success; this shift has pushed Project Managers to focus less on the technical aspects of projects, as in the past, and more on the new so-called *soft* success factors. By operating in this

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approach, Project Managers will be able to best manage a project, having understood that people, with their skills and abilities, are the primary source of valuable contributions to the project itself [4].

If in past literature the Project Manager, in his field of action, was bound to the so-called “hard factors” (i.e. the *triple constraint*), by making use of so-called “*soft skills*” (which together constitute the “*soft triple constraint*”), in a new framework identified by guidelines such as environment, personal and motivational aspects, and that involves people and their proper management, PMs can find their best expression in representing evolution, innovation and shared values such as people-centeredness and “a gentle leadership” as the same communicative efforts that accompany their daily role and mission, and that are significant also for the transition to a new corporate value, where the “future transition” is born precisely from people.

Keywords: Project Management, Project Manager, Project Leader, Leadership, Innovation, Communication, people-centric approach, soft skills, Stakeholder Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of project management, understood as a set of cross-functional and multidisciplinary activities undertaken at all levels of the organizational structure and involving anywhere from a single subject to thousands of people (stakeholders) with heterogeneous skills, disciplines, and different professional roles [5], the “Project Manager” is the key figure in the development of the project itself: he is formally responsible for it and guarantees that the final result will be achieved in line with the costs, timescales, and quality defined at the start of the project.

He has a strong methodological knowledge to ensure the project runs smoothly without neglecting any areas of expertise, but also a good dose of flexibility, openness to change, and leadership to guide the resources involved in the project.

The Project Manager works closely with all managers to achieve project objectives and ensure that the Project Management plan is in line with the program plan (in some situations, he or she may also be an external consultant performing a temporary management role); however, the role differs significantly from more traditional corporate roles that intervene in work processes through the use of formal authority, such as that of a functional manager or a manager responsible for operational units: while a functional manager usually focuses on management supervision for a functional or business unit and operations managers are responsible for ensuring that business activities are efficient, the Project Manager is the person in charge of leading the team responsible for achieving the project's objectives. His role is therefore based on authority derived directly from his skills and requires a management style oriented towards building and maintaining good interpersonal relationships, both towards the project team and the other organizational actors [6], [7].

To be appointed as Project Manager, formal validation of the role is required through a specific assignment: in this specific phase, the candidate must demonstrate the ability to communicate and negotiate with the project client and he will then be evaluated on the basis of the results achieved (in the event of project failure, the client will assess whether the difficulties encountered in the project are attributable to the Project Manager). The Project Manager is therefore responsible for managing all project interfaces (clients, top managers, suppliers, partners, project team, etc.) and must also be able to identify the most suitable professionals to achieve the project's objectives in an integrated and coordinated manner, delegating responsibilities to the project team members. Considering the above, the Project Manager's role revolves around the entire project process: it is his job to assume full responsibility for every action, choice, and communication made by each member of the team.

In summary, the Project Manager is asked to meet specific requirements regarding his technical, managerial, relational and personal characteristics (Figure 1.1) [6]:

CHARACTERISTICS	
<i>managerial</i>	Knowledge of planning and control methodologies Constant commitment to operate with a global quality perspective and customer satisfaction
<i>relational</i>	Good negotiator and mediator, leadership skills Ability to develop individual and group potential Excellent relationships with higher-level environments and with the client
<i>personal</i>	Initiative flexibility, ability to communicate, coordinate, and organize Inclination toward problem-solving

Figure 1.1 Main characteristics of a Project Manager. Source: E. Simeoni, [6]

As the complexity of the project scope increases, it becomes clear that his role shifts from pure command and control to an enabler of change through the phenomenon known as empowerment, i.e., the enhancement of resources through a process of growing in self-esteem and self-determination [8].

In today's world of constant innovation, modernization, and change, project management professionals and their teams must increasingly keep pace with new sectors, practices, and technologies while maintaining focus and efficiency on project execution and value creation.

These developments need to be addressed with the right tools and adequate knowledge: to help project professionals navigate this changing world of work and embrace smarter ways of working, PMI (Project Management Institute) has applied the Project Management Competency Development (PMCD) framework to the skills needed by the Project Manager using “the PMI

Talent Triangle”, and it has updated the sides of the triangle melding the core insights of project management and highlighting a valuable framework composed by three skill categories [9], [10]: rather than presenting rigid ones, the PMI Talent Triangle [9] frames project management competence as a dynamic balance between execution models, interpersonal influence, and strategic awareness. In this perspective, technical methodologies (“ways of working”) are only effective when supported by strong relational capabilities (“power skills”) and a clear understanding of organizational strategy (“business acumen”).

These aspects can be seen represented below in Figure 1.2. In order to increase their efficiency, Project Managers must demonstrate a balance of these three skills.



Figure 1.2: The PMI Talent Triangle. Source: PMI, [9]

Furthermore, in past literature, the Project Manager, in his field of action and project management, was bound to the “hard project-scope-time and cost triangle”, also called the *triple constraint*, *iron triangle* or *project triangle*. This triangle is a model of the constraints of project management, since the fact that a project must be subject to numerous limitations in order to be successful. It contends that traditionally, project success has been framed through the interaction of time, cost, and scope, assuming that quality emerges from their balance. However, this model tends to oversimplify the social and behavioral dynamics that increasingly determine project outcomes. The fundamental constraints, interrelated and competing, are mainly three and the following ones [11]:

- **Time:** The estimated period required to complete the project, understood as "implementation timing," driven by time to market. The time constraint highlights the urgency, as a missed deadline can be a critical factor that often causes serious consequences. Beyond urgency, this constraint is also a key element in the project's success.

- **Cost:** i.e., the maximum expenditure the company can sustain. Cost restrictions are determined by the budget allocated to achieve the project's objective and the available resources: human, financial, material, equipment, and infrastructure. Cost typically plays a primary role throughout

the project's duration, and there are many cases of projects that fail to be implemented in the initial phases due to the lack of adequate resources.

- **Quality/Scope:** This refers to the actions to be performed, i.e., the set of activities that must be completed in terms of functionality and performance in order to achieve a specific objective and ensure the project's success. Typically, in the early stages of the project, there is a very vague and unclear vision of the activities that will need to be carried out: the creation of restrictions related to the objective clearly, accurately, linearly, and precisely define what must be done and what must not be done, helping both those who launch the project and those who are responsible for its execution.

The combination of these three elements and their impact on the success of the project and its deliverables is called the triple constraint, as these three constraints, considered as cornerstones, are closely interrelated. In Figure 1.3, each side of the triangle represents a constraint: any change in one side of the triangle (and therefore to one of the system's elements) will require it to be brought back into balance and therefore to vary at least one other constraint: the change will affect the other two constraints, and together, they will lead to a different system configuration. Accelerating delivery typically requires either additional resources or a reduction in expected deliverables. Similarly, increasing scope may require equivalent increases in budget and schedule. Cutting budget without adjusting schedule or scope will lead to lower quality [12].

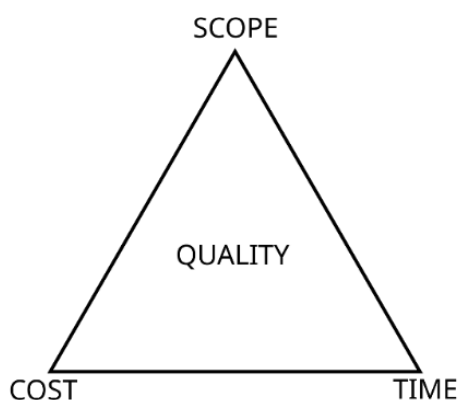


Figure 1.3 The Project Management Triangle. Source: C. Van Wyngaard [12]

As reported by several studies [13], [14], the elements that constitute project success have been a matter of discussion for the last three decades and many efforts have been undertaken to provide the project manager with useful tools and techniques to pursue the right balance between project efficiency and successful project management. While initially the effort focused mainly on tools and techniques related to the “iron triangle,” further integrated with tools and techniques focused on uncertainty and governance issues [15]; [16], recently the satisfaction of the project team has

been defined as one of the determining factors in achieving its success, and the development of skills, the growth of team members and their loyalty have been identified as possible measures to achieve this goal: an attempt has therefore been made to incorporate "soft" factors such as motivation, socialization and behavioral attitudes into the basis for successful project management, since "the project manager's leadership style influences the success of the project" and "different leadership styles are appropriate for different types of projects" [17].

In order to balance the conflicting objectives of the project stakeholders and achieve consensus, the Project Manager must make use of so-called "soft skills" (for example, interpersonal and people management skills), which together constitute the "soft triple constraint", the so-called soft triangle of project constraints, identified by the following guidelines:

- *Environment in which the project takes place* (social culture and corporate culture);
- *Personal aspects* (subjective skills related to analytical or systemic characteristics);
- *Motivational aspects*.

In general, there has been a widespread tendency to integrate the traditional vision of success based on the iron triangle with the necessity to support, during the design process, the growth needs of individual team members: in this regard, the existence of a "soft pyramid" (depicted in Figure 1.4) was recently postulated, in which the management of soft factors in a limited environment should have been assimilated to the traditional effort of managing "hard" factors (i.e. those belonging to the iron triangle):

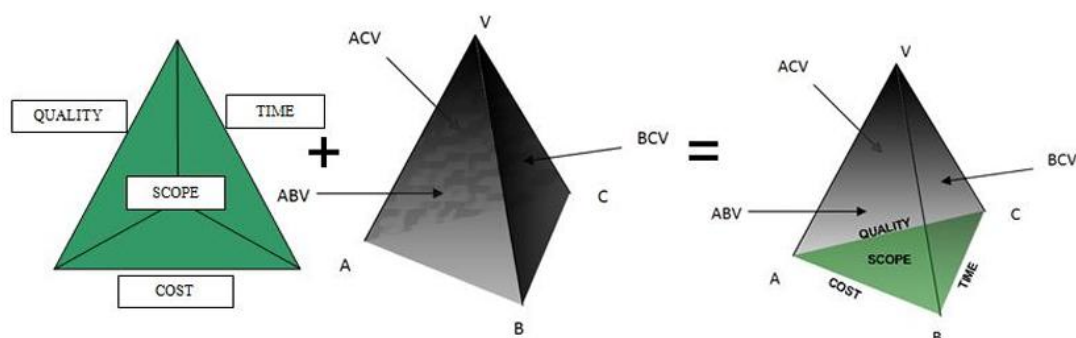


Figure 1.4 The soft pyramid. Source: Bragantini, Caccamese [13]

The image shows the spaces for the *soft factors* as interconnected faces of a triangular pyramid, in particular the following can be distinguished:

- *Motivational space (ABV)*: is the space available to the project to trigger the right context for individual motivation (e.g., working conditions, job security, advancement, growth, power, affiliation, esteem, decision-making processes and reward systems) [18];

- *Social space (ACV)*: it is the space available to activate protocols for acceptable behavior: these are made up of both rules relating to activities and social norms (punctuality in completing activities, agreed time for reading and responding to messages, respect for consensus decisions, honesty, truth, preparation and participation in meetings, punctuality at meetings) [19];

- *Analytical/holistic space (BCV)*: it is the space used by the project to encourage and facilitate the development of individual ways of thinking: while the analytical model focuses on analysis, linearity, sequentiality, reductionism and attaches a high value to expansion, competition, quantity and assertiveness, the holistic one refers to synthesis, non-linearity, parallelism, and attributes great importance to conservation, cooperation, quality and associationism [20].

To summarize what has just been stated, from this perspective the "hard triple constraint" (i.e. manageable with so-called *hard* methodologies, tools and techniques) is therefore completed by a "soft triple constraint" (i.e. manageable with so-called *soft* methodologies, tools and techniques), as good project management must go beyond the simple reference to the constraints of scope, time and cost and integrate a project environment in which the various personalities working on it can develop their own peculiarities in a state of internal satisfaction: the management of soft factors in a limited environment (the so-called "hidden pyramid", hidden in every project), must therefore be complementary to the traditional effort of managing the hard factors characterizing the iron triangle [21], [22].

From the traditional application of project management's soft skills, we move to a more structured approach, whereby the project manager must be aware that their efforts to achieve success must focus as much on the first triangle as on the second.

In both cases, the tools that allow the PM to efficiently and effectively perform his role, as well as to project themselves within the project and all the various stakeholders involved in it, are always a balanced mix of clear leadership and transparent communication skills, combined with a people-centric approach.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 1 is composed by an introduction, Section 2 illustrates the objectives of the literature research and the adopted methodology, Section 3 reports the results of the analysis and, finally, Sections 5 and 6 set out the discussion of results and conclusion, respectively.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

As mentioned in the previous section, this paper aims at highlighting the core principles to be a good leader, with particular emphasis on the synergy of transversal competences—most notably leadership and communication skills. To pursue this objective, a literature review was conducted to examine the relationship between a people-oriented Project Manager and the success of the project itself. The goal is to demonstrate the existence of a direct and mutually reinforcing relationship between these variables. The review also incorporates a range of studies that analyse the characteristics required of a Project Manager to effectively guide a team toward successful project outcomes. This research aims to extract, from various contributions, the key qualities that define a people-centric PM, offering an updated portrait of this professional figure with a view to future developments in soft-skill-based management.

The concepts outlined above converge into three Key Aspects (KAs), each relating to the so-called “*soft triple constraint*” triangle of project management. Together, these KAs serve as the foundation for fostering effective communication flows between the project team and the Project Manager. The KAs outlined are the following:

KA1. People-centric approach seen as business (and human) environment in which the project takes place (*social space* and corporate culture);

KA2. Leadership: in reference to PM’s personal aspects (subjective abilities inherent to *holistic/analytical space* and systemic characteristics);

KA3. Communication, which involves aspects related to the personal emotional sphere spread into the *motivational space*.

To explore and analyse the previously KAs, a literature review has been carried out: all the articles’ main information collected (such as database/search engines, journal, or date of publication) have been schematized and summarized (Figure 1.5). Because of conducting a systematic literature review, research outcomes have been assessed and aggregated, in order to provide a balanced and objective summary of research evidence regarding the new, *soft*, human approach in managing projects described before.

Date of publication	Author's country	Searching field	Main journals	Database/search Engines
	USA, Germany, UK, Canada, Italy	Topic, article, title, abstract, keywords, all text	Project Management Journal, PM World Journal, International Journal of Project Management, Project Management Institute, PMBOK®Guide, Journal of Information Technology Education, GEMA Business School, Engineering Management Journal	Google Scholar, IEEE International Conference on Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management, Google Chrome, ChatGPT

Figure 1.5 Searching strategy and criteria adopted in the literature review

RESULTS

The success of a project can be defined as the completion of its activities within the allocated time frame and budgeted costs, at an appropriate performance level, with customer acceptance and mutual agreement regarding changes in objectives, without disturbing the organization's main workflow and changing the corporate culture [23]. It essentially depends on two elements: the complexity of the project and its management at a strategic behavioural level. The first is an objective aspect as it is linked to the intrinsic characteristics that the individual project represents; project management, on the other hand, is subjective in nature as it is linked to the management strategy to adopt for the project itself. The latter in particular can refer to a "rational" organizational dimension, such as the definition of objectives, the identification of skills, technical and instrumental resources, respect for deadlines and budget control, or be linked to an even more decisive and purely "relational" dimension, where the internal dynamics of the group, the relationships between their members and the interrelated organizational dynamics with the project manager stand out as being of fundamental importance, as well as the latter's ability to best manage the corporate and human environment in which he operates. All this essentially translates into motivating and valorising the people involved [24], [25].

KA1. People-centric approach

The project team is a set of individuals who are performing the project's work and are directly responsible for achieving project objectives. The team's size, composition, and skill level depend on the project's type, scale, complexity, and organizational level of maturity.

The project manager, as a leader of the project team, is responsible for team formation and operation as an effective group. Beyond coordinating tasks, contemporary project managers are expected to actively cultivate motivation and empowerment within their teams, particularly in environments characterized by uncertainty, cross-functionality, and high stakeholder pressure.

Additionally, they should be aware of different aspects that influence the team such as team environment, geographical locations of team members, communications among stakeholders, organizational change management, internal and external politics, cultural issues and organizational uniqueness, and other factors that may alter project performance. Proactively developing team skills and competencies while enhancing team satisfaction and motivation also fall under a project manager's responsibility, in addition to awareness of professional and ethical behaviour [9], [26].

To develop an empowered project culture, the project environment should promote mutual trust among stakeholders and the project team members. There should be full clarity on individual roles, responsibilities, team agreements, and guiding processes. These factors enable individuals to work together and provide synergistic effects from their interactions, which can enable stakeholders to collaborate more effectively and efficiently to drive project success (see Figure 1.6 below).

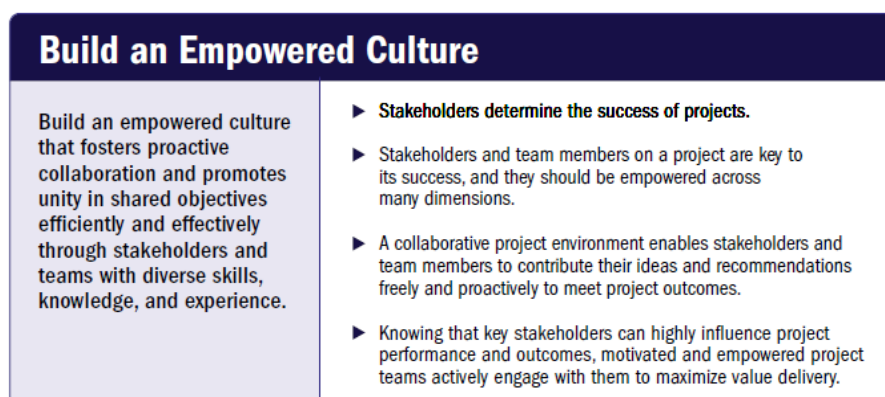


Figure 1.6 Build an Empowered Culture. Source: PMBOK, Eight Edition [9]

The Project Manager oversees a project from every perspective, integrating all parties and participants, giving each a unified and shared direction: it's clear that to perform this task effectively, a wide range of skills is required, both hard and soft. Indeed, on the one hand, a Project Manager must possess specific and technical expertise in the field in which he or she operates, while on the other, he must make use of personal skills that allow him to ensure everything runs smoothly to achieve the final goal.

This thesis is based on the idea that, although both *hard* and technical skills and *soft* and personal ones are very important, the latter are more decisive than the former in achieving objectives: a project is first of all made up of a group of people. Furthermore, these people often come from different functions, have different expertise, do not know each other and must achieve a challenging objective in a pre-established and relatively short time frame. He can in fact also be defined as *"the orchestrator of the project team itself"* [27]. Therefore, the primary task of a successful Project Manager is essentially to integrate and manage the available resources: *"project*

manager needs to adopt a specific set of techniques and become increasingly Human Relations Oriented" [28], which means that, to achieve objectives, he must integrate the people and resources assigned to him from two perspectives: both on a personal level and in terms of knowledge.

What we want to emphasize and support in this discussion is that today it is more important for a Project Manager, who is responsible for managing these resources (or rather, capital) and maximizing their performance for the company, to have a *people-centric* approach, as people are the ones who must be considered paramount to a company's success. The underlying binomial is very simple: in a context where people and their knowledge are the most crucial factors for business success, managers must be able to manage this "asset" as best as possible [29]. To do this, he must obviously dedicate a significant amount of his time to people, trying to understand them, aligning goals and interests, and building the trust that increases employee commitment and encourages them to always give more [30].

A "People-centric approach" means to create a peaceful working environment, where everyone has the concrete opportunity to express themselves and feel an important part of the project. Each team member is certainly motivated by something different; the project manager's difficult task is to understand how others experience their personal goals but also to establish a common perspective for the entire team [31].

This analysis and perspective lead to a PM figure that is increasingly closer to Human Resource Management themes: *"Project managers should understand the personal aspirations of their project team members and support them. As leaders, project managers play an important role in motivating and guiding people"* [32].

The people-centric approach is based on several key principles, such as *active listening* (understanding the needs, fears, and expectations of teams), *clear and transparent communication* to avoid misunderstandings and foster a sense of belonging, the ability to transform disagreements into opportunities for growth by *managing internal conflicts*, and finally, holding people accountable and enhancing their skills, thus also strengthening their self-esteem and cohesion (*empowerment*).

In this way, the project manager becomes not only the coordinator of activities but also the main catalyst for team commitment and motivation. This perspective brings tangible benefits, which can be summarized in the following points (Figure 1.7) [25]:

1. **Increased productivity**, as people work harder when they feel valued;
2. **Reduced turnover**: a motivated team is less likely to seek career alternatives;

3. **Positive and collaborative climate**, because trusting relationships reduce destructive conflicts;
4. **Improved quality of work**: personal involvement is reflected in greater attention to detail;
5. **Organizational reputation**: projects led by ethical and sustainable leadership also strengthen the company's image.

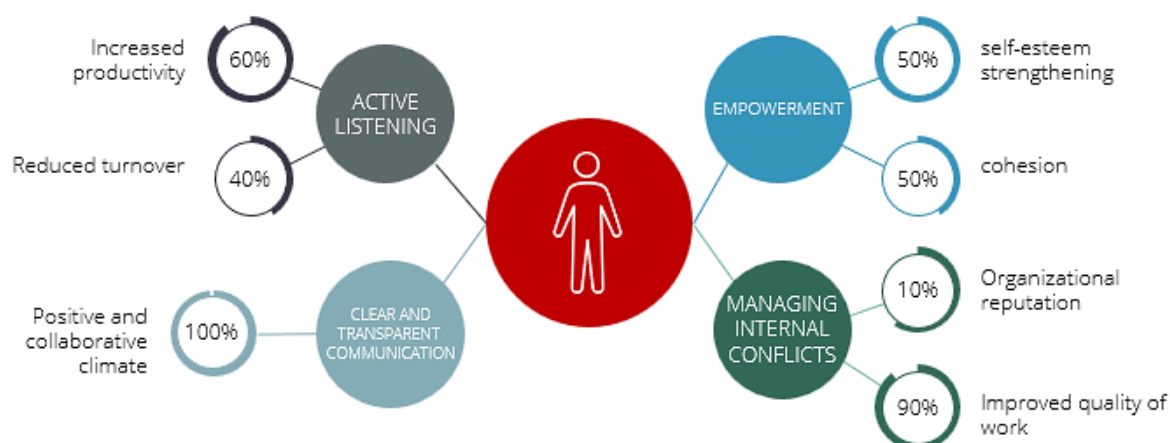


Figure 1.7 KA1: Key principles of *people-centric* approach

In an increasingly dynamic and uncertain market, organizations have realized that it's not just technologies and processes that make the difference, but above all people: a motivated, engaged, and cohesive team is better able to address complexities, react resiliently to unexpected events, and generate innovative solutions that bring added value to the company in which they operate.

In conclusion, linking people-centeredness and project success, it can be argued that when we talk about the contribution a people-centric Project Manager can make to a project's success, we're talking about the fact that by addressing the relational and emotional aspects of their team, the Project Manager influences variables such as time, costs, and performance, helping to create value for the company they work for and guiding it to success. Being people-centric also means enriching the people themselves (and therefore the company that relies on them) for purposes that go beyond the current project: it's the duty of every Project Manager to leave his team something in the form of empowerment and personal enrichment, as well as purely technical, that they can leverage in other projects. In this way, even if indirectly, this Project Manager will have contributed with his people-centric approach to the success of the project and, by extension, to the success of his organization.

KA2. Leadership

Building on these foundations, the second key area is *Leadership* (KA2), which explores team projects' need for effective leadership. Unlike general business operations, where roles and responsibilities are often established and consistent, projects may involve multiple organizations, departments, functions, or vendors that do not interact on a regular basis; moreover, they may carry higher stakes and expectations than regular operational functions. As a result, a broader array of managers, executives, senior contributors, and other stakeholders may attempt to influence a project. This diversity of influence often creates higher degrees of confusion and conflict.

Accountable leadership is about being responsible and taking ownership of the project's target business objectives, as well as the actions taken and the decisions made (see Figure 1.8). When accepting or pulling work, accountability means being responsible for the execution of that work. The key aspects of an accountable leader include the following [1]:

- **Integrity, honesty, and fairness:** required of all team members. The decisions made by a leader must be focused on the common good, helping to build trust with stakeholders;
- **Self-awareness:** this is the capability to make connections among feelings, thoughts, and actions by understanding their motives, values, and strengths. This self-awareness helps leaders build relationships to accomplish results;
- **Respectfulness, humility, and availability:** that is, be opened to feedback and work for the team, supporting their needs and removing barriers when possible;
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** the capability to adapt leadership style to the situation and the audience, based on the project's needs without losing the leader's core values.



Figure 1.8 Be an accountable Leader. Source: PMBOK, [1]

Analysing the distinct but complementary roles of a Project Manager and a Leader within a project team, if the project manager is responsible for planning, executing and monitoring project activities, and ensures that deadlines and budgets are met, the leader is instead the one who inspires, motivates and guides the team towards achieving the set objectives. The PM is based on

the concept of hierarchical power, has a certain recognized position in the company and draws legitimacy from it; the leader, on the other hand, does not (necessarily) have formal hierarchical authority and therefore must obtain legitimacy through his skills, mainly relational ones: the ability to guide, motivate and direct a group, negotiation, resilience, communication, conflict resolution and critical thinking [33].

Leadership is different from authority. In project environments, authority alone is rarely sufficient to ensure alignment and commitment. Leadership, understood as the ability to influence without relying exclusively on formal power, becomes essential for navigating temporary structures and competing stakeholder interests: a recent study [34] revealed that disengaged employees cost US companies between 450 and 550 billion dollars per year, thus confirming how a "people-oriented" leadership style represents a proactive approach aimed at creating meaningful interpersonal connections with employees to guide them and put their interests at the centre.

A PM who adopts a *people-centric* leadership approach must therefore be able to solve problems and make decisions, always learning while being results- and action-oriented. The main characteristics of this type of leadership are the following (Figure 1.9 below) [33], [35]:

- **Effective communication:** the key element in a project manager's leadership, as he must be able to clearly communicate project goals, expectations, and action plans. Actively listening to project teams and addressing concerns with empathy is equally important, as transparency and consistent communication create a working environment where team members feel engaged and informed;
- **Approachability and responsible delegation:** all team members can share their concerns, ideas, and feedback with the PM, ensuring they are listened to and have an open, proactive mindset. It's a good practice to deepen the project team members' skills and aptitudes by assigning tasks based on their abilities: this not only lightens the PM's workload, but also enhances team members' value and makes them actively involved in achieving the goals;
- **Empathy and understanding,** meaning being able to put yourself in your employees' shoes and see things from their perspective;
- **Managing challenges with integrity:** challenges and obstacles are inevitable in any project, and as a leader and project manager, it's important to address them with emotional and ethical intelligence: all problems must be addressed proactively, with honesty and intellectual integrity. This will build great trust within the project team and ensure that challenges are handled constructively and effectively;
- **Solution-oriented approach to creating a winning team:** this means knowing how to identify areas for improvement in processes, primarily by addressing employees' pain points and their suggestions. A successful leader knows how to inspire and motivate the project team: this involves recognizing and valuing the contributions of all members as

crucial to achieving overall success, encouraging innovation and creativity, and setting ambitious yet achievable goals;

- **Emotional intelligence**, understood as the ability to regularly appreciate people's contributions, sharing constructive feedback transparently and tactfully, and acting as mentors who empower employees, instilling trust in them and enabling them to learn, grow, and take ownership.



Figure 1.9 KA2: main characteristics of a people-centric leadership

People-oriented leadership styles often clash with "*task-oriented leadership*", where the priority is the efficient completion of tasks aimed at achieving organizational goals. These approaches originated from F. Fiedler's contingency model of leadership effectiveness in the 1960s [36], where he proposed that leadership effectiveness depends on the interaction between the leader's style and the particular situation.

The table below (Figure 1.10) illustrates the main differences between the two approaches:

Area	Task-Oriented Direction	People-Oriented Direction
<i>Focus</i>	Achieving goals and completing activities efficiently	Building strong relationships and supporting team members
<i>Stile di leadership</i>	Directive, structured, and often authoritarian	Collaborative, empathetic, and supportive
<i>Comunicazione</i>	Limited, often one-way; emphasizes directives	Open, bidirectional; encourages feedback and dialogue
<i>Decisione</i>	Decisive and often unilateral	Inclusive; considers contributions and team consensus
<i>Motivazione</i>	Results-oriented; may use performance metrics	Relationship-oriented; fosters a positive work environment
<i>Dinamiche del team</i>	Clarity of roles; may lead to a mechanical atmosphere	Team cohesion; encourages communication, collaboration, and creativity
<i>Adattabilità</i>	Less flexible; focuses on established processes	Highly flexible; takes team needs into consideration
<i>Possibili problemi</i>	Can lead to burnout, low morale and micromanagement. May have issues with accountability and decision-making	
<i>Situazioni ideali</i>	High-pressure environments requiring quick results	Environments needing innovation and strong team engagement

Figure 1.10 Main characteristics of leadership styles. Source: Praburam, [35]

A people-focused approach may not be suitable for all scenarios. It can sometimes be problematic for several reasons:

- Reduced accountability: leaders who develop close relationships with their employees may struggle to take a tough approach, when necessary, such as when dealing with an underperforming employee;
- Employee resentment: they may feel resentful if their input is ignored;
- In larger or more structured organizations, the nature of the work may require a more task-focused approach rather than team leadership to maintain high efficiency and productivity.

It is possible, however, to reduce the potential impact of the above-listed cases by adopting the following team management practices and tools that help integrate people-oriented leadership into the work environment [35]:

- Building trust and relationships for a strong and positive work culture, with transparency and honesty about the organization's goals, decisions, and challenges. This creates trust and helps employees feel informed and engaged;
- An *open-door* policy, which can encourage open communication and make it easier for employees to express their thoughts and feelings;

- Appropriately empowering and delegating tasks, providing regular feedback and positive reinforcement to increase motivation and productivity and create a sense of accomplishment;
- Measuring and evaluating work demands through key performance indicators (KPIs) to gauge leadership effectiveness on organizational results.

The words "*leadership*" and "*management*" are often used interchangeably, yet they are not synonymous: while management is more closely associated with directing another person from one point to another using a known set of expected behaviours, leadership involves working with others through discussion or debate in order to guide them from one point to another. The method chosen by project managers reveals a clear difference in behaviour, self-perception, and role in the project, just as the way in which the two terms are used often reveals the leadership model they are supposed to adopt [7].

The table below (Figure 1.11) compares management and leadership at various levels of importance. To be successful, project managers must apply both, trying to find the right balance for each situation.

Management	Leadership
Directs using the power assigned by the function	Guides, influences, and collaborates by building relationships
Preserves	Develops
Administers	Innovates
Focuses on system and structure	Focuses on relationships with people
Relies on control	Inspires trust
Focuses on short-term objectives	Focuses on a long-term vision
Asks how and when	Asks what and why
Focuses on year-end results	Focuses on future perspectives
Accepts the status quo	Challenges the status quo
Does things the right way	Does the right things
Focuses on operational issues and problem solving	Focuses on vision, alignment, motivation, and inspiration

Figure 1.11 Comparison between group management and leadership. Source: PMBOK 6^oEd, [7]

Leadership in project management is therefore not just a matter of direction and coordination; it also involves a strategic approach that includes the following focal points (Figure 1.12) [37]:

1. **Vision:** defining a clear and shared vision of the project;
2. **Goal Alignment:** ensuring that all team members understand and share the project objectives;
3. **Empowerment:** delegating and empowering the team to foster innovation and efficiency;
4. **Quality Culture:** promoting a culture oriented towards quality and continuous improvement.

This vision highlights a crucial aspect: the leadership of the future cannot ignore ethics, sustainability, and kindness. Specifically [25]:

- *Ethical leadership* means operating with transparency, integrity, and responsibility, focusing not only on financial results but also on respect for people and rules;
- *Sustainable leadership* means adopting a long-term perspective, capable of combining growth and well-being, without depleting human and environmental resources;
- *Gentle leadership* involves recognizing emotional needs, building relationships based on trust, and managing teams with sensitivity.



Figure 1.12 KA2: focal points of Leadership's strategic approach in Project Management

These principles aren't just abstract values but translate into concrete practices: from how we manage feedback, to our ability to support people in times of difficulty, to choosing strategies that don't compromise the team's well-being.

While traditionally, the project manager has always been seen as a sort of "controller," ensuring deadlines and budgets are met, their role is now evolving into a broader dimension: that of a true leader, capable of inspiring and motivating. The project manager's ability to transform into an ethical, sustainable, and kind leader thus becomes key to creating cohesion, strengthening engagement, and reducing the risk of conflict.

The PM becomes an interpreter of "weak signals," that is, he understands whether a slowdown is political, strategic, or emotional, and is capable of distinguishing between a healthy conflict and a destructive one: his value is therefore no longer control but judgment [38]. In other words, what makes the difference is not only the methodology, but the human and strategic vision of the leader [25].

KA3. Communication

Within their sphere of influence, PMs perform numerous roles with different corporate stakeholders (Figure 1.13): first of all, he must be able to lead the project team to meet its objectives and stakeholder expectations, balancing conflicting project constraints with available resources. However, he also performs communication roles between the project sponsor in managing internal political and strategic issues impacting the work team, the feasibility, or quality of the project itself, and between team members and other stakeholders: his role is essentially that of a communicator.

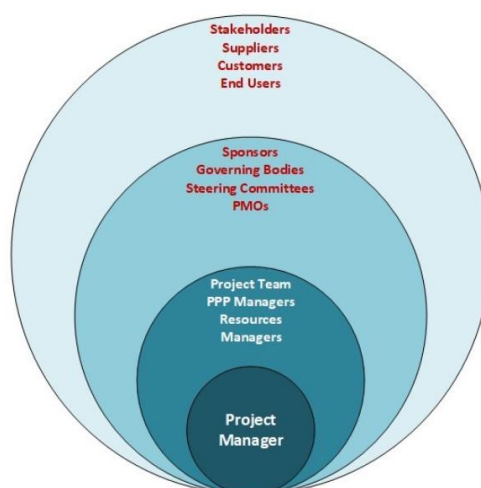


Figure 1.13 Project Manager's sphere of influence. Fonte: PMBOK 6°Ed, [7]

In particular, the ability to communicate with stakeholders, including the team and sponsors, applies to multiple aspects of the project, not just technical ones, including, but not limited to:

- Develop optimized skills through multiple methods (e.g., verbal, written, and nonverbal);
- Communicate predictably and consistently;
- Understand stakeholders' communication needs (this may be the only deliverable received by some stakeholders until the project's final product or service is complete);
- Provide concise, clear, complete, simple, relevant, and personalized communications;
- Provide feedback channels.

The PM is always in contact with people: he must be charismatic, able to listen and make himself easily understood, also being able to distinguish when to adopt a more authoritative tone and when to put himself on the same level as others [39]. His role involves planning, controlling, monitoring, and verifying costs, schedules, and stakeholders: all of this can be conveyed solely and exclusively through communication.

The importance of good communication skills is supported by many studies: it has been seen that teams that include a Project Manager capable of communicating effectively are those that deliver more projects respecting the expected time and budget.

Moreover, the etymological roots of the term “communication” emphasize its relational nature, a dimension that is particularly relevant in project management, where alignment and shared meaning are often more critical than the mere transmission of information. Communicating means involving the various social actors of the project to “pull them in”, so that they feel an active part, to obtain their commitment and to overcome any resistance.

Communication in its various forms most likely represents the action most frequently performed by the project manager throughout the entire life cycle of the project, since it is through communication that the PM projects himself, his knowledge and skills to the outside world. The term *project*, moreover, in other languages also expresses the concept of *projecting* (to project) which is better matched with the idea of communication: falling within the definition, it is the object itself that must be managed [22].

In light of this new paradigm, new KPIs could be introduced to monitor, from a relational and people-oriented point of view, the PM's work on the project and consequently the project itself. These indicators are summarised graphically in figure 1.14 below [38]:

- **Signal-to-Action Time (SAT)**, or the average time between the first evidence of a weak anomaly and the first action by the PM (the type of signal is not as important as how

quickly the PM intercepts and acts on it). It can be measured objectively using the following indicators:

1. Traceable weak anomalies (increased decision bounces, sudden silence from a key stakeholder, increased WIP without increased throughput, repeated meetings with no output);
 2. Automatic timestamp of the first event or first PM action (clarification, alignment, decision request, soft escalation);
 3. SAT, or the average number of days (as an indicative threshold, a response in less than 7-10 days is considered positive, with an average of 10-20 days of evidence, while a response after more than 20 working days is considered abnormal). This indicator measures sensitivity, interpretation, and the courage to act proactively and, above all, proactively.
- **Constructive Conflict Ratio (CCR)**, defined as the ratio between conflicts that lead to decisions and those that remain unsolved. The CCR measures how often the project manager transforms tensions into decisions. It is positive if the ratio is greater than 60%, while below 40% the project is considered risky and unstable.

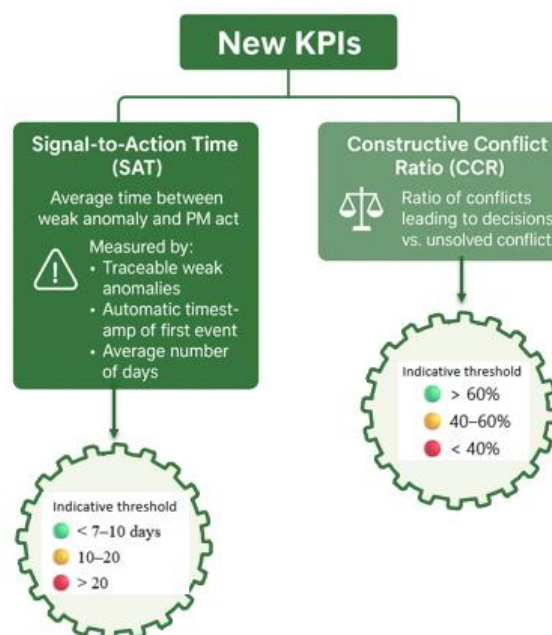


Figure 1.14: Main KPIs for assessing a PM's relational and people-focused performance.

Source: ChatGPT, [38]

For a charismatic project manager, knowing how to communicate is essential; truly effective communication is characterized primarily by factors such as:

- 1- the content of the message to be conveyed;
- 2- the relationship between the PM and the interlocutor.

The latter can be "complementary" (subordinate or intimate relationship) or "symmetrical" (equal). The second type is more unstable by definition, biased toward one or the other depending on the moment.

Regarding the message to convey, the problem arises when the PM addresses someone who doesn't like the chosen tone. For example, if he speaks to a colleague with excessive authority, he might respond irritated and feel disrespected. When it comes to relationships, it's not what is said that really matters, but how the PM expresses himself. Another important consideration is that information and meaning are not the same thing: the true meaning of a communication is what the recipient gives it; only by understanding the other person's point of view it can be made effective and gain authority and added value.

There are three possible sensory channels people use to process information: visual, auditory, and emotional. It is possible to get in tune with the other person by paying attention to his or her body language (crossed arms imply closure), to the tone of the voice (a tone that is too high could mask the fear of feeling threatened), or to symbolic language (clothing or hairstyle) and intercultural differences (habits and customs): to communicate and influence someone positively, it is fundamental knowing how to relate to him/her [40].

Good communication must be organic, clear, concise, and characterized by words that, if chosen appropriately, have a greater impact and empowerment on others. This includes not just the exchange of information on project progress, but also document management, the collection of lessons learned, data transmission and management techniques, and, last but not least, the identification and management of stakeholders from a communications perspective. Among the foundations of a communication process, the following tools for gathering and distributing information are worthy of attention. Knowing and understanding these tools can provide useful insights into how to establish a communication relationship between multiple people (see Figure 1.15) [41]:

- **meetings**, which represent a fundamental element for exchanging information, as well as valid tools for making strategic and non-strategic decisions and for correctly managing the project;
- **reports**, as they are tools that convey information on the project's status and enable decisions to be made to bring the project back into line with the planned objectives, should the need arise;
- **information distribution**, i.e., the methods used to distribute information so that it reaches its recipients in the most effective and productive way.

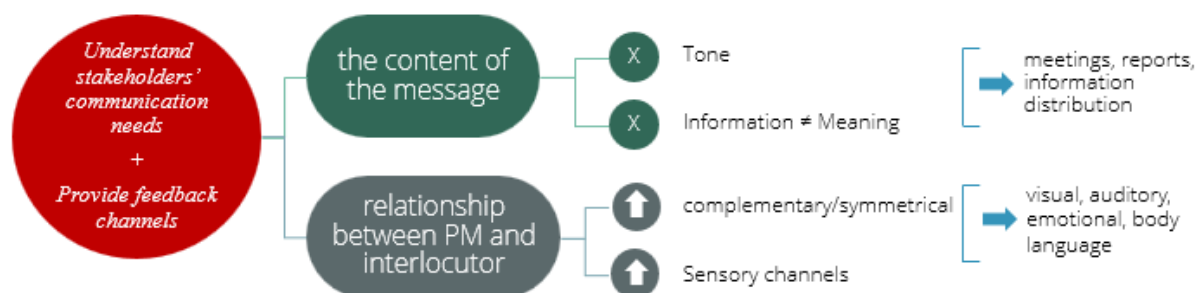


Figure 1.15 KA3: How to Communicate in a PM people-centric approach

To summarize, the Project Manager's communicative action is the result of choosing the right type of power not only for the purpose of influencing and negotiating, but also to support the other stakeholders involved in the specific project team: it is not enough to speak louder than others to emerge and achieve success, a true leader is someone who has the ability to express himself and make himself heard, and above all, to transmit with the right ways and methods the value of the people involved in the development of a project, whatever it is, guiding the performance of the activities necessary to satisfy the project objectives [8].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A recent update of the 2017 research on the causes of IT project failure, comparing historical data with the 2020–2025 period, shows that despite major technological evolution—such as generative AI, hybrid working, and digital transformation—the overall success rate of projects has remained substantially unchanged. Approximately 31% of projects succeed, 50% are “challenged” (delayed or over budget), and 19% fail completely. Large IT projects continue to be exposed to extreme “fat tail” risks, with failures that can generate severe and often unpredictable financial impacts.

Notably, the causes of failure have shifted: in 2025, issues such as weak data governance, poor data quality, and a lack of strategic alignment emerge as primary contributors. This indicates that the main barrier to project success is no longer technology itself, but the organization’s capacity and governance structures. Without a structural shift toward stronger strategic skills and robust data governance, failure statistics are unlikely to improve in the coming years [42].

Despite the increasing number of projects delivered, many organizations have not yet abandoned their traditional hierarchical structures. The transversal nature of project management, and consequently the cross-functional role of the project manager and related communication flows, continues to be perceived as misaligned with the established corporate practices of companies that remain largely vertical. Functional managers retain significant decision-making power and are

often reluctant to embrace organizational changes that could dilute their authority. This rigidity creates friction and reinforces the accountability gap between the project manager, who is responsible for the results achieved, and the team members. In this scenario, the traditional metaphor of the leader as the heroic figure who inspires the “troops” must make way for that of the diplomat: a skilled mediator and communicator capable of navigating relational complexities. In fact, projects are carried out by people, and the human factor increasingly represents the decisive element for project success across organizations, sectors, and geographies [40].

Although tools and methodologies continue to evolve, the fundamental challenge of any project remains human and organizational rather than technical. Project management should therefore be understood not merely as a set of performance domains, processes, or methods, but as a “growth mindset”: a combination of beliefs, ways of thinking, and habits through which professionals interpret situations, understand others and execute strategy.

As leaders, project managers influence all project stakeholders through their behaviour, applying a blend of leadership, effective communication, decision-making, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, and strategic thinking. Their leadership and communication style directly shapes team dynamics, motivation, and performance. Emotional intelligence supports the project manager in navigating conflict and stress, while strong stakeholder engagement and a people-centred approach help secure alignment and buy-in.

Accountable leaders focus on delivering value beyond the immediate project work. In project management, developing competencies is essential to ensure that each team member performs effectively and grows professionally within the project environment. Effective project teams create opportunities for individuals to take on challenges that stretch their capabilities and provide constructive feedback: this culture drives project success and prepares professionals for more complex roles in future initiatives, thereby strengthening the overall project management discipline [1]. At the same time, the hard aspects of management should not be marginalized. They constitute the foundation upon which human-centred practices gain meaning and impact. As this article argues, soft skills do not replace hard skills; they amplify their effectiveness. While methodological frameworks are widely available, empirical evidence suggests that many project failures are more closely associated with interpersonal and organizational issues than with technical deficiencies. This highlights the strategic importance of adopting a people-centric approach and leveraging the full potential of individuals by creating an environment where they feel empowered to contribute at their best. To contribute meaningfully to project success, PMs must evolve from technically focused professionals into well-rounded leaders capable of managing relationships and organizational dynamics. This evolution requires moving beyond standardized resource management and recognising the distinct capabilities and personalities of team members. Small, everyday relational behaviours—such as attention, openness, and genuine interest—build trust and cohesion, ultimately enhancing performance [41].

The analysis of the literature clearly shows that improving project success rates requires project managers to go beyond operational coordination and become strategic partners for both the project team and the organization. “Business Acumen”—the strategic vision and the ability to connect project activities (and especially the people involved) to corporate objectives—is a key competency within the PMI Talent Triangle and a decisive factor in increasing success rate [25]. A project manager equipped with these skills can position himself at the centre of a complex and dynamic landscape, anticipating potential risks while confidently addressing emergent and non-predictable ones. Moreover, such a leader can fulfil what this study identifies as the essence of the project manager’s role: integrating the team by creating a working environment that enables all members to express their full potential, grow, and improve. This, in turn, maximizes team motivation and fosters a virtuous climate characterized by shared objectives and a common commitment to creating corporate value [43].

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research emerge:

1. Empirical validation of people-centric performance indicators

This study introduced relational KPIs such as the Signal-to-Action Time (SAT) and the Constructive Conflict Ratio (CCR), designed to measure a PM’s responsiveness to weak signals and ability to transform conflict into productive decisions.

Future research should empirically validate these indicators across industries, assess their predictive power on project outcomes, and develop standardized benchmarks for people-centric PM performance;

2. Quantifying the organizational value of people-centric project management

While literature confirms that people-centric leadership improves productivity, engagement, and team satisfaction, its financial and organizational impact remains underexplored;

Further studies could analyse the ROI (*return on investment*) of soft skills, linking relational practices to strategic metrics such as retention, innovation capacity, decision latency, and corporate value creation;

3. Redefining project leadership in digital, hybrid, and AI-driven environments

As organizations evolve through digital transformation and hybrid work models, leadership practices must adapt. With AI tools increasingly mediating communication and decision-making, future research should explore how people-centric leadership can be integrated into digital ecosystems, and how PMs can maintain trust, clarity, and cohesion in distributed, multicultural teams.

Final Considerations

This paper contributes to existing project management literature by reframing leadership and communication not as complementary soft skills, but as structural drivers of project value creation.

In an increasingly dynamic, uncertain, and globalized environment, organizations must recognize that the truly successful project manager is one who can combine method and humanity, planning and leadership, rigour and kindness. Ultimately, it is not technologies or processes but people who make the difference. Motivated, engaged, and cohesive teams are better positioned to face complexity, respond resiliently to unexpected events, and propose innovative solutions [25].

Leadership and effective communication are therefore indispensable in guiding the team and the organization toward success, without neglecting technical aspects but placing relationships and motivation at the centre. This people-centric approach is essential, since valuable contributions always originate from people. Evidence is represented in Figure 1.16.

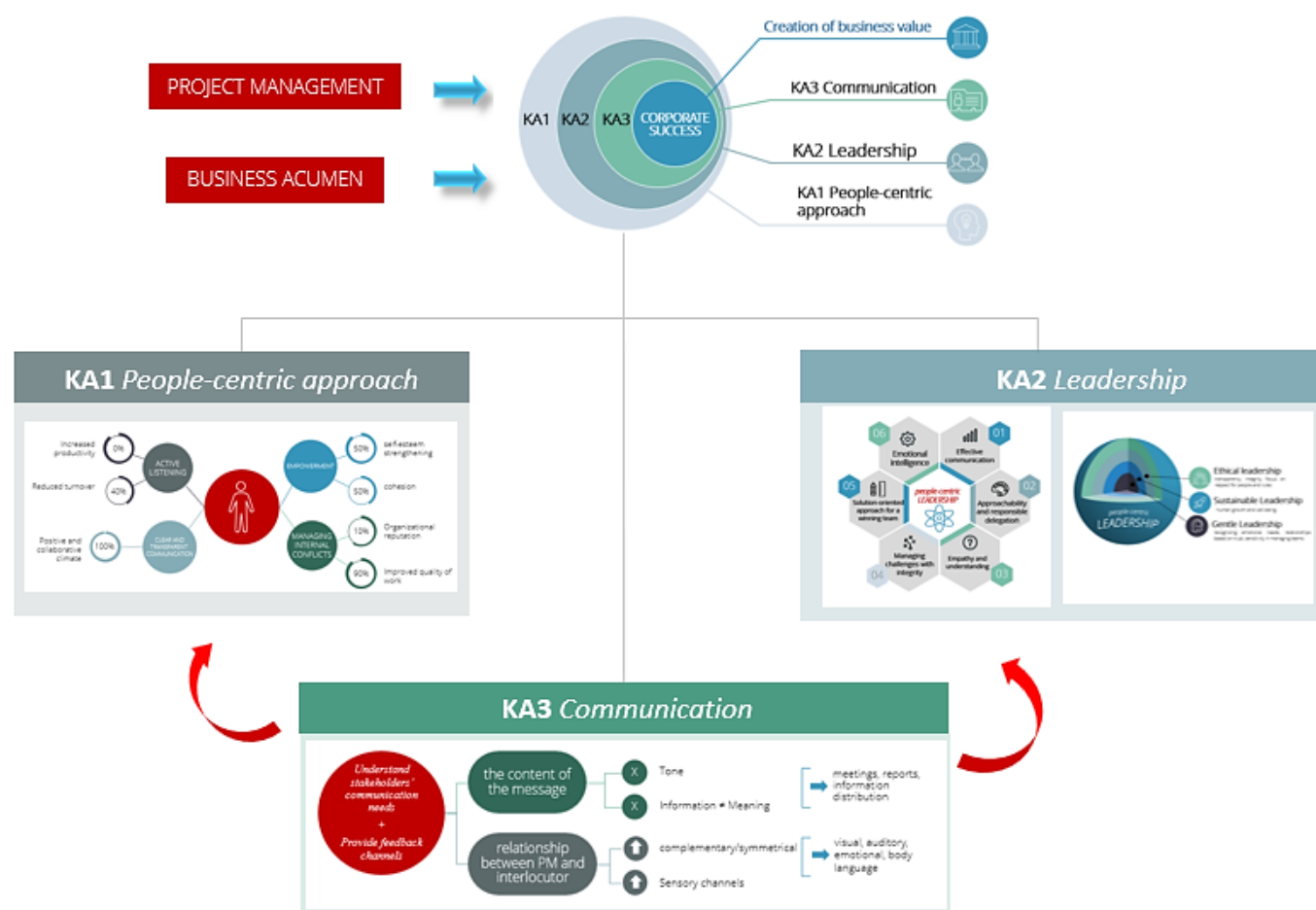


Figure 1.16 Background of people-oriented Project Manager approach with strong leadership and communication skills

A *soft* management approach, centred on a people-oriented project manager with strong leadership and communication skills, is not an optional “extra” but a true strategic factor for project and corporate success. Achieving this background requires project managers who understand the resources they work with, manage both themselves and others with leadership competence, and know how to communicate meaning and purpose. Only through this approach they will be able to build the foundations needed to guide their team—and, more broadly, their organization—toward success.

Statement on the use of AI

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to support text refinement, clarity of expression and suggestions to explore in new KPI. The intellectual content, structure, and conclusions are solely those of the authors.

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