The Team Performance Paradox: How a Single Toxic Behavior Can Sabotage a Project[1]

By Luca Paolo Giuseppe Prinzio

"A single toxic behavior can cost 40% of performance. Are you measuring it?" Discover the Felps experiment and how to change team management in projects.

Abstract

This article, inspired by Will Felps' experiment, shows how even a single dysfunctional behaviour can drastically reduce a team's performance. It proposes tools and approaches for the Project Manager to read, prevent, and transform relational dynamics in complex projects.

Introduction

In 2006, researcher Will Felps, together with colleagues Terence R. Mitchell and Eliza Byington, published a study that would leave a profound mark on the field of organisational psychology: *How, When, and Why Bad Apples Spoil the Barrel: Negative Group Members and Dysfunctional Groups*. The work, published in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, explored a theme as intuitive as it is underestimated: the destabilising effect that a single dysfunctional behaviour can exert on the entire balance of a team.

Starting from a theoretical analysis and a solid review of the literature, the researchers formalised a principle that many managers experience empirically but struggle to translate into practice: dysfunctional dynamics in groups do not develop linearly, but exponentially. In other words, a single hostile, apathetic, or chronically negative member can disproportionately compromise overall performance, even when the other team members are motivated, brilliant, and well-intentioned.

Among the studies conducted as part of their research, one in particular became emblematic for its evocative power. In a controlled university environment, Felps and colleagues divided students into small working groups tasked with solving a complex

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management problem within 45 minutes. The group with the best performance would receive a monetary prize. However, in some groups, an actor was inserted—unknown to the other participants—instructed to impersonate one of three dysfunctional roles: the Withdrawn, disengaged and apathetic, often with feet on the table and eyes on their mobile phone; the Sarcastic, critical and contemptuous, ready to ridicule others' ideas; and finally the Pessimist, constantly demoralised and ready to discourage any initiative with phrases like "We'll never make it anyway".

The result was as surprising as it was unequivocal: the mere presence of one of these negative behaviours led to an average drop in group performance of between 30 and 40%. This was despite the other three team members being motivated, competent, and collaborative. Not only that: many participants unconsciously tended to adapt to the behavioural climate induced by the disruptor, themselves adopting more defensive, less proactive, or more submissive traits.

Although the simulation itself does not represent an experiment "canonically" replicated in corporate environments, its communicative power and coherence with systemic theories of collective behaviour have made it a consolidated reference in numerous scientific and popular publications. The so-called "bad apple effect" is now a recognised concept studied in numerous contexts, from leadership to virtual teams, from education to public management.

The lesson derived is simple but powerful: teams do not always fail due to a lack of skills. They often fail due to the presence of subtle, corrosive, not immediately visible dynamics that undermine trust, participation, and a sense of belonging. Precisely for this reason, the task of the modern Project Manager can no longer be limited to planning and controlling activities. It must increasingly include the conscious management of relational dynamics, with particular attention to those behaviours that, if neglected, can irreparably compromise the group's effectiveness.

Implications for Project Management

(When the problem is not technical, but the invisible dynamic)

Professor Felps' experiment forces us to shift the focus: no longer just on skills, deliverables, and milestones, but on the relational dynamics that act as the supporting structure or invisible breaking point of the project itself. If a single dysfunctional behaviour can compromise a team's performance by up to 40%, this means that interpersonal dynamics are not a "soft" variable, but a hard project lever, as critical as an unmitigated technical risk or a non-negotiable constraint.

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Technically impeccable projects, but destined to fail?

How often does an IT project, perhaps well-written in the plan, endowed with sufficient budget, a qualified team, and a visible sponsor, derail? Experience shows that the majority of project failures are not attributable to methodological or technical shortcomings, but to relational breakdowns, distrust, submerged conflicts, or poorly managed sabotaging behaviours.

In this light, Felps' experiment provides a framework for reinterpreting in project terms the phrase: *"culture eats strategy for breakfast"* (Drucker).

Managerial Implications

The Project Manager as Social Regulator and Guardian of Team Cohesion

Will Felps' experiment has the merit of making visible what too often remains invisible in the daily practice of Project Management: the specific weight of relational dynamics in determining the success or failure of a project. We are accustomed to monitoring time, costs, and deliverables with rigour, while we rely on intuition—or hope—to manage group cohesion. Yet projects do not only founder due to estimation errors or poor planning: sometimes they fail due to emotional wear and tear, latent conflicts, or motivation that fades day by day.

For the Project Manager, all this represents a profound call for the evolution of the role. It is no longer sufficient to plan, assign, and monitor. It is also—and increasingly—necessary to observe, read, and intervene on the level of human interactions. In this sense, the PM assumes a new role: that of social regulator, relational observer, and manager of behavioural risk. It is they who protect the health of the group, not as an option, but as a precondition for performance.

This evolution first requires a different sensitivity. The PM must learn to grasp weak signals: repeated silences, sarcasm disguised as irony, drops in energy, merely formal participation. And they must be able to grasp them not only in official moments—reviews, retrospectives, dailies—but also in informal contexts, where the group's emotional temperature manifests more clearly: a message that doesn't arrive, a joke that freezes the chat, a missing emoji where one was always present.

Managing dysfunctional behaviours thus becomes a strategic act, not just a human one. Every team knows, sooner or later, the weight of a "difficult presence": the pervasive pessimist, the indifferent person who disengages, the sarcastic one who dismantles every enthusiasm. Sometimes these attitudes arise from frustration, sometimes from an

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unprocessed abrasive communication style. But what matters, beyond motivations, is the effect they produce: they demotivate, isolate, and slow down. And when they are not addressed, they end up becoming systemic. A Project Manager who chooses "not to see" to avoid conflict is effectively allowing the project to slowly derail. Intervening with method, respect, and courage is not a matter of character: it is a managerial duty.

Finally, it must be remembered that every team develops implicit roles, which do not always coincide with formal ones. Alongside Dev, PM, or UX designer, the silent motivator, the social glue, and the influential charismatic emerge. These roles can be valuable resources, but also factors of imbalance if not recognised, rebalanced, and managed. The dominant technician can obscure divergent voices. The emotional facilitator can burn out trying to keep everyone united. The charismatic can transform their ascendancy into cynicism or control. The PM's task, then, is also to read the invisible plot of relationships, give space to those who tend to be marginalised, and limit centralising or sabotaging drifts. Governing implicit roles means consciously orienting the team's operational culture.

Ultimately, Felps' experiment does not just ask us to "understand" how much behaviour matters in a team. It invites us to act accordingly. And for a Project Manager, this means embracing with lucidity and method their function as guarantor of cohesion, guardian of the relational climate, and architect of the conditions in which teamwork can truly produce value. Because the real project risk is not technical error, but the silent corrosion of relationships. And preventing it is, today more than ever, leadership in its purest form.

Behavioural Implications

Understanding Before Correcting: The Subtle Art of Managing Difficult Behaviours

One of the most profound lessons from Felps' experiment is that dysfunctional behaviours are not always what they seem. Cynical attitudes, emotional disconnection, passive resistance are not necessarily symptoms of hostility or incompetence. Often, they are the visible manifestation of something moving beneath the surface: an unheard frustration, a lack of recognition, an unexpressed need. It is here that the Project Manager's role takes on a new and deeper nuance. It is not just about correcting "toxic" behaviours, but understanding their origins, their function, and, where possible, transforming them into constructive levers.

Sarcasm, for example, can hide a subtle communicative intelligence, used as a defence in contexts where a hostile or uninterested climate is perceived. Pessimism can stem from an excess of attention to risks, which—if reconverted—can make that person an effective promoter of prevention and prudence. Even indifference can be reinterpreted as a sign of

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disconnection from the project, often generated by uninclusive leadership or a lack of ownership. In all these cases, the key question the PM should ask is not "how do I remove this behaviour?", but "where does it come from? What is it trying to signal? Is it possible to reintegrate it into a healthier dynamic functional for the group?". Some experienced Project Managers have managed to transform a pessimist into a Risk Champion or a sarcastic person into a creative provocateur: it is a complex gamble, certainly, but also an act of authentic leadership.

Alongside individual management, the team's self-regulation potential must be considered. Too often the group's ability to self-correct is underestimated, if placed in conditions of safety and listening. A cohesive team, which perceives itself as an active part of the process, is able to express mutual feedback, isolate toxic dynamics, and restore balance without needing authoritarian interventions. For this to happen, however, it is essential that the Project Manager creates horizontal spaces for dialogue, far from the command-and-control logic. Well-facilitated retrospectives, moments of informal dialogue, participatory practices like Lean Coffee or circle times, become precious tools for bringing latent tensions to the surface without triggering frontal conflicts.

A crucial role in this process is that of the "silent voices". The more introverted or less visible members are often the first to perceive dysfunctions, but also the last to speak up. Giving them space, valuing their point of view, legitimising their presence through non-invasive methods—anonymous surveys, visual boards, emotional check-ins—can be a transformative act for the group's climate.

All this converges on a key point: the sense of belonging. When people feel part of something, the desire to protect that something becomes natural. The team develops a collective resilience that neutralises many corrosive behaviours from the outset. This is not magic, but the result of a deliberate effort by the Project Manager: involving members in decisions, showing them the concrete impact of their contribution, celebrating successes authentically, building a shared identity. A group that perceives the project as "theirs" will tend to protect it, to commit more, to correct itself spontaneously when something is wrong. In that context, even an initially problematic behaviour can fall into line, become an object of discussion, and—sometimes—transform into a resource.

Ultimately, managing difficult behaviours is not a matter of control, but of understanding. It is an exercise in systemic reading, in which the PM is called to abandon easy labels and embrace complexity. Because behind every resistance, every sarcasm, every disengagement, there is always a story. And only those who choose to listen can truly change its ending.

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Organisational and Strategic Implications

The Systemic Ground That Nurtures—or Stifles—the Quality of Project Dynamics

Thinking of improving team dynamics without considering the broader context in which those teams operate is a form of managerial naivety that no organisation, today, can afford. Felps' experiment, by strongly highlighting the relational fragility of groups, invites us to shift our gaze: not only on the individual's behaviour or the Project Manager's ability to manage internal dynamics, but also—and above all—on the organisational system that generates, tolerates, or amplifies those dynamics.

There are corporate environments where clearly dysfunctional behaviours are not only tolerated but are even rewarded because they are associated with visible results or attitudes considered "strong". In these contexts, the sarcastic person is perceived as brilliant, the indifferent as inoffensive, the pessimist as realistic. The result is a culture that rewards output and ignores the relational cost that same output entails. The risk is cultivating a form of toxic success: technically efficient but relationally unsustainable. In the absence of a culture that also values the human dimension of teamwork, every tactical improvement will always be fragile, every project success vulnerable.

More mature organisations—as demonstrated by consolidated frameworks like P3M3 or IPMA Delta—have understood that the quality of interactions within teams is not a secondary variable, but a strategic indicator of the company's ability to withstand complexity. For these organisations, Project Management is not just an operational function, but a cultural component, a lens through which to read behaviours, values, and power dynamics. It is the Project Manager, in fact, who more than others finds themselves immersed in the intersections between people, objectives, and limits. And if they are not put in a position to intervene—with tools, policies, and internal alliances—they become an impotent guarantor, a guard without a whistle.

In this scenario, the connection between PMO and HR becomes crucial. Two functions that too often run on parallel tracks, when instead they should co-design languages, intervention models, and growth paths. Projects are not done without people, and people do not grow without projects. Integrating these two dimensions—technical and relational—is a priority. It means equipping oneself with shared policies for managing dysfunctional behaviours, cross-feedback tools between PM, sponsor, and team, and training paths that develop collaborative skills with the same seriousness with which technical skills are certified. Because today, an excellent PM is first and foremost a facilitator of collaboration, a climate regulator, an architect of meaning.

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But there is another factor that has profoundly revolutionised group dynamics, and which deserves specific attention: remote work. Remote working was not just a response to an emergency: it has become a structural paradigm of organisational life. And with it, the ways in which dysfunctions emerge—or do not emerge at all—have changed. Physical distance has erased the weak signals that were once easy to catch: fleeting glances in meetings, tensions in the corridors, silences that were too long, micro-expressions that betrayed latent unease. Today all this is lost behind a switched-off webcam, a muted microphone, a chat with no replies. Dysfunctions have not disappeared. They have only become more subtle. More elusive. And therefore more dangerous.

The Project Manager thus finds themselves operating in a context where invisibility is no longer an exception, but the norm. Where absence is not physical absence, but emotional disconnection. Where alienation is not expressed in shouting, but in missing emojis. In this scenario, the ability to read weak signals—to grasp who is "there but not participating", who is present but disconnected—becomes a key competence. It is no longer just about aligning tasks and milestones, but about holding people together in a system that risks silently disintegrating.

Working remotely also introduces a risk of polarisation: on one side are the visible, proactive, vocal members; on the other, those who risk becoming invisible, marginalised, judged on the basis of absence rather than the quality of their contribution. This is where the PM's responsibility comes into play: creating spaces for dialogue, moments of emotional check-in, opportunities to map the group's sentiment not just with words but through observable signals. And to do this, a new relational sensitivity is needed, capable of deciphering what is not said, of welcoming fragility without stigmatising it, of bringing people back to the centre as the living core of the project.

Remote working is not, therefore, a simple logistical change. It is an epistemic change: a new way of knowing, interpreting, and governing the life of a team. In this new world, technical intelligence is no longer enough. Relational intelligence, systemic attention, and the courage to act even when no one asks openly are required. Because teams today do not fail for lack of tools. They fail when the corporate culture does not support them. And the Project Manager, more than ever, is the interpreter and custodian of this culture.

KPIs and Impact Metrics

(Why What Isn't Measured Isn't Managed—Especially in Team Dynamics)

One of the most valuable—and often overlooked—teachings emerging from Professor Felps' experiment concerns the progressive and silent nature of dysfunctions in work groups. A

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team does not stop functioning suddenly. The loss of effectiveness is almost always the cumulative effect of small, ignored signals: an implicit exclusion, a tension never addressed, a participation that fades meeting after meeting. This process, however, apparently impalpable, is perfectly measurable. And what is measurable, in the field of Project Management, is also potentially governable.

In today's context, dominated by complex projects, distributed teams, and tight delivery rhythms, the adoption of behavioural metrics becomes not a methodological whim, but a managerial imperative. If classic project indicators—time, costs, scope—photograph the "what" that is produced, relational metrics tell the story of the "how" that result is built, lived, and sustained. In a healthy work environment, both aspects are essential.

For this reason, the Project Manager must learn to move with ease also in the intangible dimension of the project, equipping themselves with a set of KPIs specifically designed to monitor the climate, interaction, involvement, and methodological coherence of the team.

Consider, for example, the quality of communication. An effective team is not distinguished only by the quantity of messages or scheduled meetings, but by the balance and distribution of interactions. When one or two members monopolise conversations and others remain on the margins, when discussion turns into conflict or, worse, apathy, we are faced with clear signs of imbalance, deserving attention.

Equally crucial is the perception of psychological safety. Teams that feel free to express ideas, doubts, criticisms, and proposals without fear of retaliation or judgment are those that learn, evolve, and innovate. This level of openness is not to be taken for granted, and must be measured consistently: through structured feedback, moments of authentic listening, and careful observation of underground dynamics.

On the decision-making level, it is essential to monitor not only the timeliness of choices but also their transparency and sharing. Imposed or misunderstood decisions generate discontent and misalignment, while participatory and coherent choices strengthen mutual trust and accountability.

Another often neglected domain is that of latent conflict. Tensions that run through teams do not always manifest openly: they often hide behind irony, silences, cutting remarks, or sudden emotional absences. Knowing how to grasp these signals—and equipping oneself with tools to make them visible—is a key competence for the PM.

Last but not least, there is methodological coherence. Adopting an Agile or Scrum framework does not just mean following ceremonies, but embodying its values. If retrospectives become empty rituals, if the backlog is ignored, if responsibilities are

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opaque, then we are faced with a coherence problem, which must be addressed with lucidity.

In summary, talking about relational KPIs means recognising that people are not just "resources" to be assigned to tasks, but active, sensitive, influenceable, and, above all, influential subjects. Group metrics are not soft. They are hard data, speaking of the project's health in terms of sustainability, cohesion, and resilience.

Ignoring them means accepting the risk of seeing a promising initiative derail for non-technical but human causes. Including them in the project plan, in review moments, in quality documents, means making a cultural leap: from mere delivery management to true leadership of human capital.

Artificial Intelligence in the Deep Reading of Teams

Governing Relationships Before They Become Risks

Artificial Intelligence is profoundly changing the way the Project Manager can read, understand, and govern the internal dynamics of a team. If once the relational climate was a subjective matter, entrusted to the leader's intuition, experience, or sensitivity, today AI makes it possible to transform those perceptions into observable data, making visible what was once only sensed. This shift from sensation to measurement is not just a technical turning point: it is a cultural evolution in project management.

AI technologies indeed make it possible to detect micro-dynamics often invisible to the naked eye: a gradual decline in meeting participation, an increasing recourse to passive-aggressive language, the recurrent use of sarcasm, a growing emotional distance of a team member. Predictive analysis and Natural Language Processing (NLP) allow these patterns to be identified before they degenerate into explosive tensions, relational dropouts, or real group crises.

In particular, the analysis of written and spoken language—from chat messages to comments on tasks, to verbal exchanges—allows us to grasp emotional nuances and weak signals that escape traditional analysis. It is possible to identify recurring themes in retrospectives, clusters of critical issues, or variations in emotional tone that herald deeper malaise. The Project Manager can thus have dynamic dashboards that not only display data but suggest targeted actions: a 1:1 discussion with a member at risk of isolation, a group check-in when the climate seems to be cooling, or targeted interventions to redistribute voice in decision-making processes.

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Even feedback collection is transformed: dynamic and adaptive surveys can improve data quality, adapting in real time to the responses received, while conversational systems based on AI (chatbots) can monitor the team's "emotional weather" continuously and discreetly.

However, this advanced analytical capability is not without risks. Artificial intelligence, however sophisticated, operates on correlations, not causality. A drop in messages, for example, does not necessarily equate to disengagement: without human context, the risk of erroneous interpretations is high. Algorithms can also be affected by cultural or linguistic bias, especially if trained on generic datasets not representative of the organisational reality in which they are applied. The result? False positives, improper labelling, distortions that amplify problems instead of solving them.

Added to this is a central ethical issue: the perception of being observed can profoundly alter team behaviour. If the technology is perceived as covert surveillance, there is a risk of a panoptic effect, where people superficially adapt to expectations, losing spontaneity, trust, and well-being. In other cases, the risk is total delegation to the machine: "if it doesn't alert me, everything is fine"—but algorithmic silence is no guarantee of relational health.

For these reasons, the adoption of AI in team monitoring must always be accompanied by rigorous governance: clarity on objectives, transparency on methods, informed consent of participants, and constant human supervision. AI should not replace the PM, but enhance their capacity for listening and intervention. It must be an ally, not a judge.

Ultimately, measuring is never a neutral act. Deciding what to observe, how to analyse it, and how to act on the results means shaping the project's culture. And today, more than ever, behavioural metrics are not "soft": they are key predictors of performance, well-being, emotional resilience, and operational sustainability. Governing them with the help of artificial intelligence can make the difference between a project that slides into relational chaos and one that, even in difficulty, manages to keep the thread of collaboration strong.

Because in projects, the real fault does not always appear in the logs. But AI, if well guided, can help prevent it before it's too late.

What It Teaches the Project Manager

Governing the Human System Before the Technical One

Will Felps' experiment, demonstrating how even a single dysfunctional presence can compromise an entire team's performance, is not a simple academic provocation: it is a lucid X-ray of the daily reality that every Project Manager lives, often without tools to read it. It underscores how a project's effectiveness depends not only on correct estimates, well-

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defined tasks, or respected milestones, but on the silent and invisible quality of the relational fabric that unites—or divides—the people involved.

For the modern PM, especially in high-complexity contexts like ICT, Public Administration, or the Agile/DevOps environment, this is a profound call to redefine their function. Success is not played out only on the management of plans, but on the ability to read, protect, and enhance the project's human ecosystem. True leadership does not consist in controlling, but in caring. Not in dictating the pace, but in keeping the orchestra cohesive.

Being a "curator of relational ecologies" means knowing how to grasp what is not visible in Gantt charts: suspicious silences, cutting comments, sudden drops in energy or motivation. It means sensing when a team is disintegrating before delays even emerge. To do this, the PM must train their emotional skills: active listening, situational empathy, constructive conflict management, the ability to read nuances and act with promptness and lucidity.

It is not enough to enhance the group's talents: one must defuse what hinders them. The Project Manager has the responsibility to also monitor behaviours that make no noise but generate fractures: apathy, sarcasm, and indifference. They must create protected spaces where tensions can emerge and transform, where the team can face relational knots before they become systemic dysfunctions.

Even silence should be considered project data. Too many failures do not occur due to implosion, but due to absence: absence of confrontation, of authenticity, of real participation. This is why we also need to design informal moments: listening rituals, emotional check-ins, cold feedback, opportunities for those who usually remain silent to speak. The real risk is not what is said poorly, but what is not said at all.

Alongside classic technical tools, the PM needs a new set of relational tools: tools that measure engagement, visualise trust, intercept the first signs of wear. They are not "soft tools", but strategic prevention instruments. Ignoring relational discomfort today means paying for it tomorrow, in terms of delays, turnover, rework, or loss of commitment.

But all this makes sense only if the Project Manager understands their cultural role. Every individual behaviour reflects—and shapes—the team culture. When cutting irony becomes the norm, when detachment goes unnoticed, when fatigue finds no welcome, the problem is not the individual, but the system. In that context, the PM must act as a "cultural sculptor": consciously shaping the group's implicit rules, building shared meaning, re-establishing the boundaries of what is healthy, acceptable, and desirable in working together.

Finally, every project has a human cost. The mature PM knows this, and prepares to contain it. They know that technical results are not worth it if obtained at the expense of the team's

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emotional resilience. They integrate into the plan also the care of people: moments of decompression, recognition of relational load, attention to well-being. Because a worn-out team may finish the project, but will not withstand the next one.

Governing a project today means accepting the responsibility for a complex, fragile, and powerful human ecosystem. It means protecting what holds people together when tasks falter. And knowing that no deliverable can ever compensate for the fracture of a poorly managed human bond.

What to Do Operationally?

From Theory to Practice: How to Truly Protect Team Performance

Felps' experiment, beyond its elegant scientific construction, has a profoundly operational value: it forces us to acknowledge that a team's performance is not only the result of individual abilities or good processes, but of the quality of the relationships that hold them together. Every Project Manager knows—even just by intuition—the moment a project cracks: not when a deliverable breaks, but when trust breaks. A single out-of-place comment, a silence too long, a joke loaded with sarcasm is enough for collective energy to drop, motivation to waver, and the climate to become heavier.

For this reason, acting promptly on relational dynamics is not a good practice: it is a project duty. Systematically observing team behaviour, not only in formal moments but also in informal passages, is the first step. It is about seeing who really participates, who disconnects while remaining present, who dominates the dialogue and who remains invisible. This observation, however, must occur within a framework of respect, without falling into forms of control or micro-management, and always respecting privacy and data protection regulations, especially in public contexts.

A second crucial action is the timeliness of intervention. Every ignored dysfunctional behaviour tends to consolidate. The PM who remains silent for an easy life or for fear of breaking the balance is, in reality, already compromising it. Confrontation, if well conducted, is an act of care. Offering clear, descriptive, respectful feedback—anchored in facts and impacts—helps defuse discomfort before it becomes systemic dysfunction. Time, in these cases, works against.

Retrospectives also need to be rethought: no longer simple technical reviews, but spaces for bringing the unsaid to light. When structured with courage, with questions that truly touch the quality of relationships and not just process efficiency, they can reveal latent tensions, restoring to the team the possibility of self-repair. But the PM needs to know how

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to facilitate these moments with attention, avoiding them turning into sterile venting or empty rituals. Spoken words must generate visible actions.

Another fundamental step is the explicit definition of shared relational rules. Too often teams operate with implicit codes: it is presumed what is acceptable and what is not, but it is not declared. And so, whoever is stronger imposes their norm. Creating an explicit pact, at the start of the project or at each critical phase, helps build a common language and shared behavioural criteria.

But all this is not enough if the sense of responsibility remains confined to the Project Manager alone. When the team develops a widespread ownership—when each member feels a guardian of collective well-being—then a virtuous dynamic of self-correction is triggered, in which tensions are managed before they even reach the PM. Fostering this culture also means alternating informal roles, stimulating distributed leadership, making each person responsible for caring for the climate.

Managing "difficult" roles, then, requires lucidity and differentiated intelligence. Not all dysfunctions are equal: there are Withdrawn people to re-engage, Sarcastic ones to involve on a more conscious level, Pessimists to value as risk sentinels. The PM cannot adopt a single corrective scheme. Adaptation, listening, and—in the most serious cases—even the courage to part ways with those who compromise others' work are needed.

Finally, the real leap in maturity lies in formalising climate management within the project plan. Not as an ethical appendix, but as a structural component. Inserting well-being metrics, planning relational reviews, assigning explicit responsibilities for team monitoring means treating cohesion as an asset and not as a side effect. But attention: measuring is useless if one is not willing to act. Surveys left without follow-up worsen trust, rather than improving it.

However, it must also be recognised that not all organisations are ready for these tools. In highly regulated contexts, such as Public Administration or sectors subject to strong regulatory constraints, it is necessary to proceed with caution. The introduction of behavioural detection tools must be accompanied by transparent policies, informed consent, and careful assessment of legal and reputational risks. Some practices, such as the analysis of communicative patterns or the use of AI for sentiment monitoring, require a foundation of trust and organisational maturity that cannot be taken for granted.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of these actions depends on the culture in which they are inserted. If the environment is still dominated by vertical logics, command-and-control, and a low tolerance for vulnerability, any attempt to map relational dynamics risks being perceived as invasive, if not punitive. In these cases, it is better to act gradually, start with

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small experiments, and build a common language with the team and stakeholders, rather than import tools that may prove misaligned.

In summary, protecting a team's health is neither a mechanical act nor a delegation to technology. It is a continuous, adaptive, and profoundly human commitment. It requires method, but also presence. It requires tools, but above all a discerning gaze. And it requires, more than anything else, a PM willing to believe that the team's climate is not an accessory, but one of the most important variables of project success.

Conclusion

Felps' experiment is not a simple curiosity from a social laboratory. It is a powerful lens that forces us to look deeply at what happens—or does not happen—inside project teams. It brings into focus an uncomfortable yet undeniable fact: it is not tasks that send a project into crisis, but relationships. It is not technical deficiency that is the real Achilles' heel, but the silent erosion of trust, communication, and cohesion.

In the concrete world of project management—be it ICT, public administration, consulting, or manufacturing—Project Managers are often evaluated based on what they produce: impeccable Gantt charts, respected milestones, budget under control. But the true effectiveness of a PM today is also measured—and perhaps above all—in their ability to safeguard what is not seen in the tools: the quality of interactions, the degree of listening, the psychological safety of the group.

A team can be technically excellent and humanly disintegrated. It can possess the best skills, but sabotage itself due to tolerated sarcasm, ignored indifference, or pessimism left to ferment. It is in these invisible interstices that the most insidious risk lurks: the one not measured with classic KPIs, but which impacts the entire system.

Thus, the Project Manager's role expands. It is no longer merely an orchestrator of activities. It becomes a relational maintainer, an architect of the team climate, an interpreter of weak signals, a director of a collaboration that works even when no one is formally "working".

Method is needed, certainly. But courage is also needed. The courage to face difficult conversations, to intervene on corrosive behaviours before they become normalised, to build environments where people can function together—and not just perform alone.

Today's context, increasingly hybrid and distributed, makes this challenge even more complex. Remote work has taken away from the PM many of the traditional antennas: glances, gestures, silences caught in corridors. Dysfunction signals have become quieter, more digital, easier to ignore. But precisely for this reason, the PM's responsibility grows:

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they must know how to read the new languages of discomfort, prevent invisible marginalisation, manage distance not only logistical but also emotional.

All this is not an addition to the PM's work. It is its evolutionary core. It is what distinguishes a manager from a leader, an executor from a facilitator, a controller from a builder of cohesion.

Because today—more than ever—the quality of projects is decided in the unsaid, in the margins, in the silences. And a Project Manager who knows how to recognise and transform them is doing much more than delivering a deliverable: they are creating the conditions for people to give their best, together.

A team does not fail for lack of capacity. It fails for lack of cohesion.

Final Motto

"A team is not what it does, but what it is when no one is watching. The PM's true job is to make that moment as solid, healthy, and productive as possible."

Note on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist in translation from Italian to English and to improve the linguistic clarity of the text. All content, analyses, arguments, and conclusions are entirely the work of the author, who maintains full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and validity of the presented work. No part of the substantive content was generated by AI.

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