

## *Projectland Goes to the Movies*

# **Five Ways Movies Teach Leadership and Team Lessons Exceptionally Well <sup>1</sup>**

**Dawn Mahan and Jerry Manas <sup>2</sup>**

In our last installment, we made the case that movies are a great way to help project teams learn and align, with the added benefit of building a shared language and culture. After all, as we stated, movies are really project stories at heart. Let's dive a little deeper to see why movies and stories make such a difference, and why the Eighth Edition of the *PMBOK Guide* cites storytelling as a key enabler of project success, especially around communication and stakeholder management (Project Management Institute, 2025).

Here are 5 specific reasons movies can be such an effective way to help people grow stronger project skills and leadership capabilities.

### **1. Movies Engage Our Emotions**

Unlike traditional case studies, which are often sanitized and stripped of emotion, movies place us directly inside the pressure cooker. The stakes feel real. The clock is ticking. The characters care deeply about the outcome, and so do we.

That emotional engagement is what makes lessons stick. Whether it's the underdog team in *Moneyball* defying convention through ingenious analytics or the crew of *Apollo 13* solving one problem after another to bring their team home safely, we're not just observing the situation. We're experiencing it with them.

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<sup>2</sup> Dawn Mahan and Jerry Manas, co-editors of the wildly popular book "*Projectland Goes to the Movies: 22 Blockbuster Strategies for Project Success*" published in January 2026 by Project Guru Press. [To learn more about the book, click here.](#)

In Projectland, challenges rarely arrive with neat textbook answers. Teams must recognize the kind of situation they're in, assess imperfect options, and make the best decisions they can with limited information while the clock is ticking.

Movies allow people to experience those dynamics in a way that feels immediate and memorable.

## **2. Stories Help People Understand – and Remember – Faster**

Cognitive science tells us we remember stories far better than facts. The human brain is wired for story, which is why simple parables have lasted generations. A well-chosen movie scene can sometimes communicate more about leadership, conflict, or teamwork than an entire slide deck because people can see the decisions unfold in real time.

As with great projects, compelling movies have a beginning, a middle, and an end; they confront setbacks, alter strategies, and reveal character through the choices they make. When you connect lessons to memorable moments—Juror #8, played by Henry Fonda, challenging the other jurors to slow down, question assumptions, and confront biases in *Twelve Angry Men*, or Ripley taking charge despite her fear in *Aliens*—we move beyond abstract concepts by showing people navigating difficult situations under pressure.

This experience makes lessons easier to recall when similar situations appear in real projects.

## **3. Movies Highlight the Human Side of Projects**

In every project, the human element determines success or failure. Process and software can only go so far if people aren't aligned or committed to working well together.

Movies make those human dynamics visible.

Think of *Wonder Woman*, where Diana's courage and moral foundation inspire others to move past fear and take action. And *The Martian*, where an agile approach, ingenuity and optimism allow astronaut Mark Watney to overcome isolation and survive.

These stories remind us that empathy, trust, adaptability, and teamwork are not optional "soft skills" in Projectland. They are, in fact, essential.

#### **4. Movies Show Leadership Under Pressure**

Movies allow us to observe leadership styles and decisions in action: calm captains, inspiring mentors, brilliant but flawed visionaries. Watching them succeed—or fail—lets us safely explore what makes teams follow or resist.

In *Apollo 13*, Flight Director Gene Kranz demonstrates steady, empowering leadership. In *Jurassic Park*, park founder John Hammond and his team reveal the dangers of trying to maintain control through denial and hubris—throwing money at spectacle while underinvesting in critical safeguards like technology and risk management. Both illustrate how the tone from the top shapes outcomes.

Films reveal leadership pressure in the form of moments we can watch and discuss—without anyone’s career or budget on the line. They create opportunities for meaningful conversations that otherwise might feel awkward or abstract.

#### **5. Movies Inspire Creative Problem Solving**

Projects rarely unfold exactly as planned. Great project managers can think like movie characters (or screenwriters!) when the plot takes a turn: improvise, don’t panic, and find a way through to a proper resolution.

Projects also require innovation amid uncertainty. Fortunately, films give us vivid demonstrations of how to do that, often in a fun and entertaining way. The heist team in *Ocean’s Eleven* adapts when their plan goes sideways. Indiana Jones repeatedly demonstrates flexibility while staying focused on his powerful purpose.

These moments reinforce the lesson that successful teams don’t give up when conditions change. They regroup, engage in creative problem solving, and find another path forward together.

## What This Looks Like in Practice

Now that we've explored how film helps lessons about human interactions resonate, let's look at the practical side. Here, Dawn Mahan shares her experience of using movies as a learning tool:

The first time I experimented with this idea was at a global Fortune 50 tech firm in London. In previous sessions, news articles were the basis for the Capstone exercise in our "Project Management for Everyone" workshops. This time I gave them a choice. "Would you prefer to read a real-life news article and decode it based on everything you learned over the past three days, or watch a movie and do the same?" All but one person enthusiastically shouted, "Movie!" And every class since then has had the same reaction.

Fast forward to working as the first project management college instructor for the YearUp program in Philadelphia in 2019. Even though the students thought *The Italian Job* from 2003 meant that it was an old movie (wonder what they would've thought about the 1969 original!), I knew I had connected with them when one student who had been a particularly tough cookie in class, messaged me during the pandemic and asked for the title so she could watch it again.

Observing all of the students working in small groups through the worksheets—figuring out for themselves that Mark Wahlberg's character was the project manager, and Yasiin Bey (otherwise known as Mos Def) played a Subject Matter Expert—I thought, "Wow. We're onto something here."

From college students to experienced professionals, the shift was the same: people new to Projectland moved from passively receiving information to actively making sense of it.

Getting busy people to see the same thing and move in the same direction because of it is not easy, but it's necessary. Movie moments can foster that alignment in a unique and memorable way.

But which lessons and movie clips will resonate? We'll take a look at that in our next installment.

## About the Authors



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**Dawn Mahan** is the founder of PMOtraining, LLC, and coined the term, Projectland®. She is a dynamic international speaker, award-winning project management consultant, and author of the Amazon #1 bestselling book, *Meet the Players in Projectland: Decide the Right Project Roles & Get People On Board*. Visit her website at [PMOtraining.com](http://PMOtraining.com).



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*Projectland Goes to the Movies: 22 Blockbuster Strategies for Project Success* (2026 Amazon Hot New Release) is available globally.

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