

When the Project Manager Must Use Real AI – as in Actual Intelligence ¹

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Ask any recent college grad about their job prospects and get ready to duck. They will bend your ear about the slim pickings with Artificial Intelligence [AI] oft cited as a primary cause for the upheaval (Latham & Humberd, April 2, 2026). Attempting to land promising entry-level positions in business and project management that lead to long term career paths has always been a challenge; now more so.

As the AI virus becomes a full pandemic throughout organizations and society, the astute Project Manager [PM] needs to be conversant with both the tools of AI and become the savant of AI. That is, *Artificial Intelligence* for the routine and mundane project tasks, and *Actual Intelligence* for the real managerial and leadership aspects of their PM role. This article will march through the muck and mire of both constructs.

The Promise and the Peril of Artificial Intelligence

The Age of AI forbodes both the thrill of victory and agony of defeat. The promise of AI portends the transformation of managers to gain improved productivity, lightning speed information retrieval, develop strategic plans without a hitch, create seamless reports along with the bullet-point status reports, and schedule lunch plans [for the celebration]. However, reality sets in with the peril of diminishing human interactions and corroded decision making. Disdain AI and the PM is left behind; overly rely on AI and the PM will be relegated to the obsolete scrap heap. How to strike the balance?

Leveraging AI requires balance (Latham & Humberd). In the country song words of Kenny Rogers - the savvy PM needs to know when to play their AI chips, as in when to “*hold ‘em*” and when to “*fold ‘em*”. That is, letting the AI algorithms crunch the data and create the solutions versus exercising their own judgment in generating their decisions

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AI is the PM's Time Saving Savant. AI helps the PM compress time *like magic*. The PM can utilize AI to rapidly scan vast quantities of information, synthesize key points, and produce first drafts of documents and presentations. The PM should use AI to accelerate the most tedious tasks of managerial work: gathering data, preparing materials, and finding patterns (Latham & Humberd).

Time is always tight on projects. The PM should use AI to handle the groundwork so that they can focus on sensemaking. AI can outline a report so that the PM can focus on their managerial forte: deciding what findings matter, what signals to prioritize, and what the implications are for strategy or next steps. AI can summarize team feedback while the PM concentrates on what actions to take. AI can prepare the talking points for a project performance review, while the PM prepares and practices their presentation delivery. The PM stays in command of the decision analysis instead of being mired in the administrative misery [or "*admiseria*" for short] of paperwork (Latham & Humberd).

The PM needs to consider AI's output as raw material and not as finished work (Latham & Humberd). The PM should digest AI as any informed yet incomplete input with their work to properly review, reflect, and appropriately format into completed decisions. The PM who publishes and/or presents AI-generated results without the appropriate evaluation and assessment is abdicating their management responsibilities. The objective is speed with discernment, not speed alone (Latham & Humberd).

When Not to Use AI

AI may accelerate work, but communication and decisions involving values, relationships, and/or trust demand human judgement (Laker, March 30, 2026)

AI May Quiet Good Judgment. The danger comes when speed begins to replace scrutiny. AI makes suggestions confidently, even when these ideas are shallow or wrong. It can cause the PM to skip the second look they would normally take, which will dull one's judgment over time (Randazzo, Joshi & Kellogg, February 03, 2026).

This risk of using AI is highest when the PM is making decisions that depend on values, nuance, or relationships — precisely the work that defines good management. AI cannot sense the emotional weight of a change announcement, the politics around a promotion, or the fragility of

a struggling employee's confidence. AI will give the PM an answer with no sense of human context (Latham & Humberd).

In hiring, for example, AI can short-list resumes in seconds, but it cannot gauge a candidate's resilience based on how they talk about a setback during an interview. When it comes to strategy development, AI can surface competitive trends, but it cannot sense how the project team will emotionally react to a bold new direction. In these moments, the PM's presence matters more than their productivity (Latham & Humberd).

If the PM accepts AI's output without editing them, then the PM *must* slow down. The PM must ask themselves: *Would I stand by this recommendation if my name were on it alone? Would I say it out loud to someone I respect?* Those questions reinsert accountability — and accountability sharpens judgment (Latham & Humberd).

Putting AI in Its Place

The PM has the opportunity to make deliberate choices about how and when artificial intelligence can best serve their team and themselves. Here are three ways to make the most of AI — and one's own skills.

Automate Tasks, Not Trust. A practical way to stay balanced is to divide the project teamwork into tasks and trust. Tasks are the repeatable processes that benefit from speed. Trust is the human currency of management — the beliefs, emotions, and loyalties that bind a team together.

The PM should use AI on the 'mechanical' project tasks, such as drafting timelines, crunching numbers, or generating slides. The PM must not use it where trust is paramount. The PM must deliver feedback themselves. The PM could write the opening paragraph of a promotion announcement in their own voice, then let AI complete the detail. The PM must decide when to change a goal or approve a hire with their own mind engaged, not on autopilot judgment. This distinction keeps AI working as the PM's tool not their proxy. AI does the mechanical / mundane work while the PM does the meaningful thinking work (Latham & Humberd).

For example, the PM can astutely use AI for the weekly team meetings. AI can help build the agenda, surface metrics, and compile questions from the team's project status reports. But the tone of that meeting — whether people feel heard, valued, and motivated — is the PM's alone

to create. No algorithm can do that for a humanoid. When trust is at stake, the PM must resist the urge to outsource to the AI robot.

Use AI to Widen Perspective, Not Narrow It. Another trap is using AI only to confirm what the PM already believes. Because these tools are designed to be agreeable, AI will happily produce arguments that support the PM's instincts. This can make the PM feel more decisive while actually limiting the options they consider (Latham & Humberd).

When trust is at stake, resist the urge to outsource. To avoid getting stuck in one's own ideas, occasionally the PM should instruct AI to make a counterargument to their preferred option. If the PM is leaning toward reorganizing a team, ask for reasons not to. If the PM is ready to approve a budget, ask for the strongest case to reject it. This will force the PM to confront counterarguments before they commit — and it protects them from becoming overly certain about a decision simply because a machine echoed their view. The best PMs use AI to challenge their thinking, not to cushion it. They treat AI as a sparring partner, not a cheerleader (Latham & Humberd).

Build a Personal Guardrail

Even experienced PMs can slip from using AI wisely to leaning on it too heavily. The shift is subtle although it often feels efficient. To prevent this misfortune from occurring, the PM can build a simple guardrail: Track how much of one's day involves thinking that could not be delegated. The PM should ask themselves: *Did I use AI to enhance my thinking or replace it? Did I exercise my judgment critically, or did I accept recommendations more automatically?* These questions force the PM to notice the slope before they slide.

Savvy PMs set time blocks for "AI-free thinking" each week — no prompts, no tools, just unstructured reflection. Other PMs limit the use of AI to specific tasks and keep a manual list of decisions where they want to feel the full weight of responsibility. Whatever the method the PM chooses, the point is to keep drawing on their own judgment and critical thinking.

In conclusion, AI may accelerate work, but it can't lead people. Columnist Benjamin Laker suggests leaving the mechanical tasks to artificial intelligence so that the PM can focus on the meaningful work — the work that requires the management skills at which humans excel. PM should rely on their own judgment to deliver messages and make decisions involving values, relationships, or trust, he advises. That's the job of the PM, and a responsibility that should not be outsourced to AI. (Laker)

Thriving in the AI era does not mean adopting it fastest but remaining unmistakably human while using it. AI can accelerate project management work, but it cannot care. It can generate options, but it cannot hold responsibility. That is the job of the PM — and the more AI can do for them, the more deliberate the PM must be about what they still do themselves. Let the machine do the lifting, not the leading.

If you wish to discuss this topic in more detail, please feel free to contact me at

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Best regards,

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