
Projectland Goes to the Movies

Turning Movie Moments into Practical Project Lessons ¹

Dawn Mahan and Jerry Manas ²

In the first two articles in this series, we shared [Why Stories and Movies Help Project Teams Learn and Align](#), and [Five Ways Movies Teach Leadership and Team Lessons Exceptionally Well](#).

Together, they examined *why* movies can help build shared understanding and make project lessons easier to grasp and remember. Now we turn to the practical question: *How* can you translate a memorable movie moment into action?

Turning Film into Practical Project Lessons

When we began developing *Projectland Goes to the Movies*, we invited project experts who also loved movies to identify a pivotal scene and explain the practical project lesson they saw within it. Twenty-two contributors from around the world responded with lessons spanning strategy, leadership, teamwork, risk, communication, and creative problem solving.

The chapters are organized into three acts:

- **Act I – Setting the Stage:** Vision, strategy, and approach.
- **Act II – Directing the Show:** Leadership and teamwork.
- **Act III – Herding Cats:** A Projectland production (the messy realities of getting things done through people).

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² 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.](#)

This structure helped us examine movie lessons across the full project journey, from establishing direction to leading people through the messy realities of delivery.

Together, the chapters, inspired by movies from *Aliens* to *V for Vendetta*, reinforced an important point: a useful movie lesson does more than remind us of an entertaining scene. It helps us recognize a familiar project situation, identify the pattern beneath it, and decide what to do differently.

Turning a movie moment into action usually begins with a specific purpose. A project leader might want to clarify a vision, prevent a communication breakdown, improve a decision-making practice, or help a team recognize an emerging opportunity. The next step is to select a scene that makes that situation visible and relatable.

The most effective scene is not necessarily the leader's favorite movie moment. It is the one that will resonate with the audience.

Dawn learned this while using *The Italian Job* (2003) in a 2019 capstone class for YearUp students. To many of them, it was an old movie they had never heard of because it had been released when they were still in diapers. When she asked which movies they thought might work in future classes, they enthusiastically created their own list, which included several films that were unfamiliar to her.

This experience highlighted a practical lesson: different generations are familiar with different films. When choosing a scene, consider whether the audience may already know the film. Familiarity can make the lesson easier to recognize and discuss. The possibilities for finding useful movie moments are nearly endless.

The key is not simply choosing a movie. It is translating the movie moment into a recognizable project pattern and then into action.

A Sampling of Lessons from the Screen

Here are a few examples from our book, as framed by the experts who wrote those chapters:

Moneyball (Grayson & Laura Barnard): "In business and baseball, if you want to win, stop chasing what looks good and start focusing on what gets results."

For a project team, the recognizable pattern is the tendency to favor reassuring

appearances over meaningful evidence. Turning the lesson into action might mean defining three to five leading indicators of success and reviewing them during every status meeting, even when the project appears to be progressing well.

Apollo 13 (Dr. Mike Clayton): “Projects don’t need heroes. They need professionals who work together, unrelentingly; falling back on rigor, professionalism, and discipline.”

The pattern is especially relevant during critical or crisis moments, when teams can become overly dependent on individual heroics. Turning the lesson into action might mean clarifying roles before a crisis occurs, establishing a simple decision-making protocol, and creating a culture in which escalating issues early is rewarded rather than punished.

Top Gun (Dave Lozinger): “A gameplan is a necessity for any project to be successful. But when the situation is uncertain, complex, or untested, team members need to communicate with each other often, deliberately, and unambiguously.”

The recognizable pattern is that plans alone are not enough when conditions are complex or rapidly changing. Turning the lesson into action might mean agreeing in advance on communication cadences, escalation triggers, and no-surprises norms.

These patterns appear repeatedly in movies and in project life. Stories help make them visible, but their real value comes from what teams decide to do differently after recognizing them. The Four Ps provide a simple way to make that translation.

From Movie Moment to Project Action: The Four Ps

A memorable movie scene can open the door to a useful conversation, but recognition alone is not enough. The goal is to help people connect what they see on the screen to a decision, behavior, or practice in their own project environment.

We use four steps to make that translation. They can be remembered simply as the **Four Ps: Purpose. Pick. Pattern. Pivot.**

1. Clarify the Purpose

Begin by identifying what you want the movie moment to help accomplish.

You might be trying to solve an existing problem, prevent a predictable one, improve the way the team works, or help people recognize an opportunity. The purpose could be to clarify expectations, encourage earlier escalation, strengthen decision-making, improve collaboration, or create a shared picture of success.

A clear purpose keeps the conversation focused. Without it, a movie clip may be entertaining but fail to produce a meaningful result.

2. Pick the Scene

Choose a scene that makes the situation visible and easy to discuss.

The best choice is not necessarily the most dramatic or famous scene. It is one that reflects the project dynamic you want people to recognize and is appropriate for the audience. A short scene involving conflicting assumptions, unclear leadership, effective teamwork, ignored risks, or changing conditions may be more useful than an entire film.

When possible, select a movie the group may already know. Familiarity allows people to move quickly from recalling the plot to examining the lesson.

3. Name the Pattern

Ask the group to look beneath the characters and the storyline.

What behavior is helping or hurting the outcome? What assumptions are being made? What information is being ignored? How are leadership, trust, roles, communication, or decision-making affecting what happens next?

Naming the pattern helps people move from “That was a good scene” to “We do something similar on our projects.”

It can also make a difficult issue visible, relatable, and safer to discuss. Teams may find it easier to examine a character’s behavior first and then recognize the same pattern in their own version of Projectland.

4. Prepare to Pivot

Finally, help the team identify and agree on one practical change.

The pivot might be a new question the team agrees to ask, a clearer decision rule, an escalation trigger, a revised meeting practice, or a more explicit role expectation. It does not

need to be a sweeping transformation. In many cases, one small and visible change is more likely to be adopted and sustained.

For example, a discussion about *Apollo 13* might lead a team to clarify who has decision authority during a crisis. A lesson from *Moneyball* might prompt the team to identify better indicators of progress toward the ultimate goal. A scene from *Top Gun* might lead to clearer communication expectations during an upcoming phase when conditions may change quickly.

Purpose. Pick. Pattern. Pivot.

Clarify why the conversation matters, choose a scene that brings the situation to life, identify the pattern it reveals, and help the team agree on what should change next.

Curtain Call: Turning Inspiration Into Action

We encourage you to think of other movies that bring lessons for you or your teams. In Projectland, there are always challenges to overcome, risks to anticipate, and opportunities to pursue. It's simply the nature of the place.

In a recent workshop, Dawn asked participants what was most challenging about their version of Projectland: the process, the tools, or the people?

The answer was overwhelmingly: the people.

That is not surprising. Projects don't usually fall apart because someone failed to complete a template correctly. Even in the age of AI, people will continue to make or break projects.

Most people working on projects are not project management experts. They may not know what to expect or what is expected of them. Many so-called people problems are rooted in differing expectations, assumptions, roles, and interpretations of success. A memorable movie moment can help make the friction people are feeling visible, relatable, and safer to discuss.

Imagine how attitudes might shift if you incorporated a memorable movie moment into one of these conversations. Consider using the Four Ps in your next:

- Kickoff meeting

- Stakeholder conversation
- Risk discussion
- Change management strategy session
- Lessons learned workshop

To clarify your purpose, consider whether you need to address a tool issue, improve a process, or build shared understanding.

Tool issues often appear as friction with templates, software, or dashboards, or as concerns about the quality of information being captured.

Process issues involve unclear steps, handoffs, governance, or decision paths.

Shared-understanding issues arise when there are misaligned expectations, hidden assumptions, or competing mental pictures of success.

Once the purpose is clear, **pick** a scene that brings the situation to life. **Name the pattern** the team needs to recognize. Finally, **prepare to pivot** by agreeing on one practical change the team will make after the conversation.

In our workshops, we often use film scenes specifically to surface shared-understanding issues. Once teams can see the pattern, they are often more willing to acknowledge an opportunity for improvement and work together to strengthen their tools, processes, or teamwork practices.

Even if you never open our book, you can still use the approach:

Clarify the Purpose. Pick the Scene. Name the Pattern. Prepare to Pivot.

Think about one project conversation you have coming up. Clarify why the conversation matters, choose a scene that brings the situation to life, identify the pattern it reveals, and prepare to help the group agree on one practical change to implement next.

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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.



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Projectland Goes to the Movies: 22 Blockbuster Strategies for Project Success (2026 Amazon Hot New Release) is available globally in paperback, ebook, and audiobook formats.

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