

How to Develop Your Project Management Career

A humble vision ¹

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A project management career is not built only by earning certifications, learning new tools, or managing increasingly complex projects. A project management career is built by becoming a better professional—and a better person—one project at a time. After decades working with project managers and writing about project leadership, influence, sponsorship, and success, I have learned that career development is a continuous journey of experience, reflection, relationships, attitude, and learning. I practice the sentence “You could be my teacher” every day, try to learn something new, and look for opportunities to share those lessons with peers, colleagues, and friends worldwide.

Here are seven principles I recommend to every project manager who wants to grow.

1. Don’t manage projects—develop yourself

Your projects are your classroom. Every difficult stakeholder, unexpected change, conflict, failure, and successful delivery allows you to learn something about project management—and about yourself. Listen to your team members’ and other stakeholders’ opinions, and learn from them.

Ask yourself after every major project:

What did I learn? What would I do differently next time? What capability did I develop?

Experience becomes valuable only when we reflect on it. Be strict about doing that; it is worth it. Nobody is perfect, and we can all reflect on what we have done. Focus on the positive side, and you will gain enough strength to dedicate some time to the negative.

2. Develop influence, not just authority

The most effective project managers understand that they rarely have enough formal authority to make everything happen. They need to influence sponsors, customers, team members, peers, suppliers, and senior executives. My work on *The Influential Project Manager* emphasizes the importance of understanding people before trying to influence

¹ How to cite this work: Bucero, A. (2026). How to Develop Your Project Management Career - A humble vision, advisory, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue IX, September.

them. Your career will accelerate when you learn to listen, communicate, negotiate, build trust, and adapt your approach to different people.

3. Build a strong relationship with your project sponsor

A project manager should not see the sponsor as simply the person who approves the budget. A good sponsor is a strategic partner. Learn how to communicate bad news early, provide meaningful information, understand the business context, and ask for the support you really need.

I believe that strong project managers manage the project. Great project leaders also manage the relationship with the sponsor.

4. Become comfortable with discomfort

Career growth rarely happens inside your comfort zone. Volunteer for projects where you don't know all the answers. Work with people from different cultures. Present to executives. Take responsibility for difficult situations. Learn technologies you don't fully understand. One story I want to share is my experience contributing as a PMI volunteer over the years. My purpose was, and still is, to help the profession move forward by interacting, exchanging, and learning with every team I was part of. I consider myself a small ant helping to develop a better project management body of knowledge. I believe that curiosity is a key component for the project manager mindset.

Especially in the AI era, project managers must become comfortable saying:

“I don't know yet—but I will find out.”

Uncertainty is not a threat to your career. It is an opportunity to develop it.

5. Develop your attitude

In my book *Today Is a Great Day*, I emphasize something that has become central to my own philosophy: **Your attitude influences how you experience your professional life.** Technical competence matters. But resilience, optimism, gratitude, persistence, patience, and the ability to find possibilities in difficult situations matter too. You cannot control everything that happens in a project. You can control **how you respond**. And people remember how you made them feel long after they forget the project schedule.

6. Become a lifelong learner

The PM profession is changing rapidly. AI, new ways of working, agile and hybrid approaches, organizational transformation, sustainability, and increasing complexity are redefining what organizations expect from project professionals. Don't wait for your

organization to tell you what to learn. Create your own **Project Manager Career Development Plan**.

Identify three areas:

- What I know
- What I need to improve
- What I need to learn next

Then turn them into action. Read. Study. Experiment. Teach others. Find mentors. Learn from colleagues.

And remember:

Teaching is also a powerful way of learning.

7. Leave every project—and every person—better than you found them

The ultimate measure of a project manager's career is not the number of projects delivered. It is the positive impact you create through those projects.

Did you develop people?

Did you build trust?

Did you help a junior project manager grow?

Did you improve the relationship between the business and the project team?

Did you create an environment where people could succeed?

That is project leadership.

A Case Study: From Project Manager to Project Leader

Consider **Maria**, a project manager with eight years of experience.

She was technically strong. She had a PMP certification, managed complex projects successfully, and consistently delivered within approved budgets and schedules. But her career had stalled.

She expected her next promotion to come naturally from her project results. It didn't. Her manager gave her some difficult feedback:

"You are a very good project manager. But you are not yet perceived as a project leader."

Maria initially disagreed. She believed that successful delivery should be enough. Instead of becoming defensive, she decided to treat the feedback as a development opportunity.

Step 1: She changed her perspective

Maria stopped asking:

“How do I deliver this project?”

and started asking:

“How do I create an environment in which this project can succeed?”

That small change transformed her behavior.

Step 2: She worked on influence

She realized that she was spending too much time managing tasks and not enough time understanding people. She began meeting key stakeholders individually, listening to their concerns, understanding their expectations, and adapting her communication style. Her stakeholder relationships improved significantly.

Step 3: She strengthened the sponsor relationship

Instead of sending her sponsor long status reports, Maria started focusing conversations on:

- Business outcomes
- Decisions required
- Emerging risks
- Stakeholder concerns
- Where she needed executive support

The sponsor began involving her earlier in strategic discussions.

Step 4: She deliberately sought discomfort

Maria volunteered to lead a transformation project involving AI. She didn't consider herself an AI expert. But she didn't need to be. She surrounded herself with specialists, asked questions, learned continuously, and focused on leading the people and decisions around the technology.

Step 5: She developed other people

Maria also started mentoring two junior project managers. Instead of giving them answers, she asked questions and helped them think through problems themselves. Her influence expanded beyond her own projects.

The result

A year later, her manager promoted Maria. But the most important change wasn't her new title. Her identity had changed. She was no longer measuring her value by what she personally delivered. She was measuring it by the capability, confidence, relationships, and results she helped create around her.

That is the transition from **project management to project leadership**.

Your Career Is a Project Too

Your career deserves the same attention that you give to your projects.

Define your objectives. Understand your stakeholders. Identify your risks. Build your capabilities. Review your progress. Learn from setbacks. Celebrate achievements. And don't forget one of the most important lessons from *Passion, Persistence, and Patience*:

You cannot achieve career success overnight. It is built through small decisions, repeated consistently, over time. So, if you are a project manager thinking about your next career step, don't ask only:

"What certification should I get next?"

Ask:

"What kind of project leader do I want to become?"

That question can change your career.

My proposed Project Leadership System

I feel blessed as a project professional because I've had the opportunity to meet great project leaders in my career, and I've learned a lot from them. One of my greatest experiences was working with my great friend Randall L. Englund, who mentored and trained people over the years.

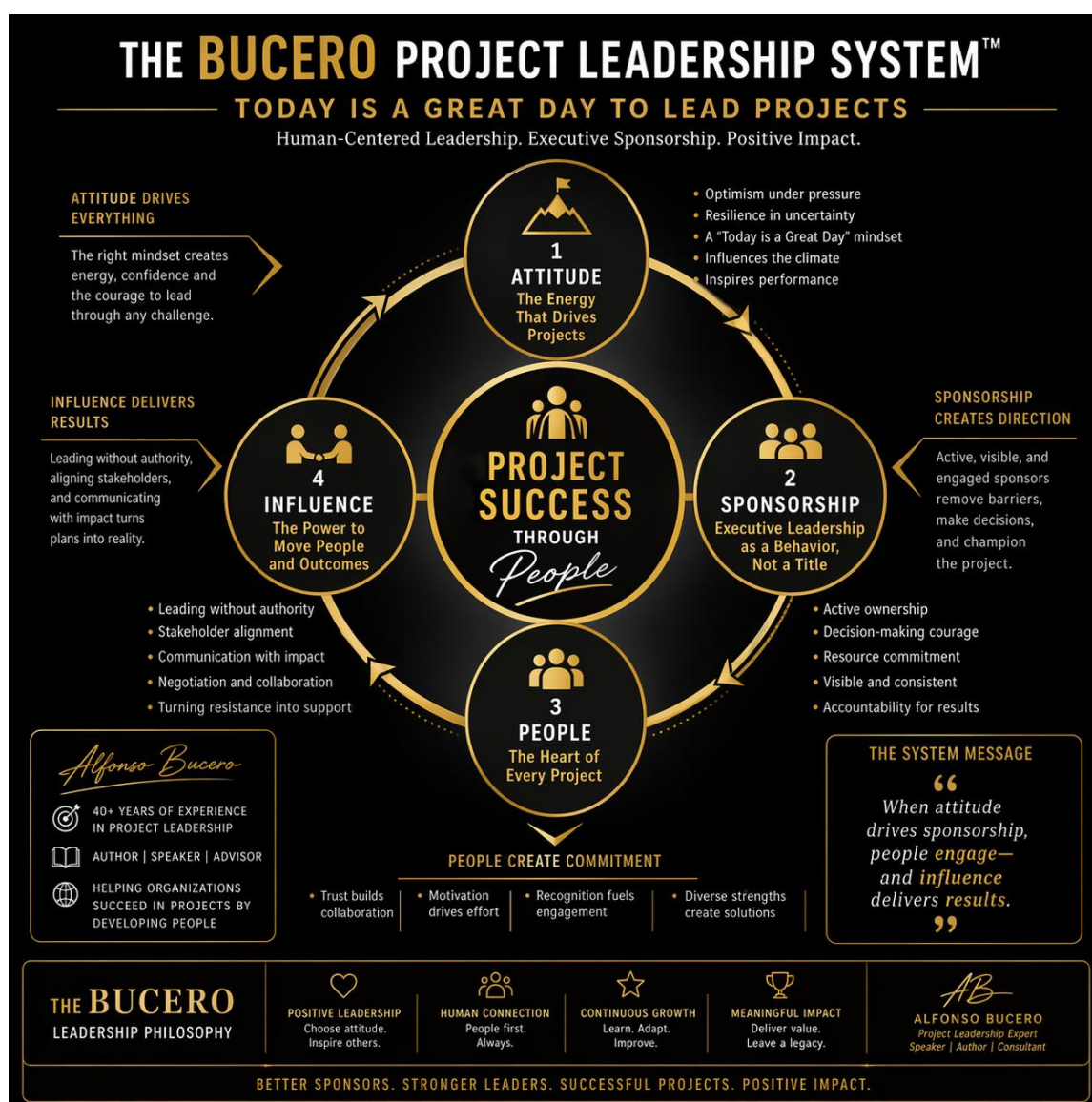
I had the opportunity to learn from and work on multinational projects and participate in international programs that taught me the importance of leading people. Based on my work as a project manager, PMO manager, and instructor, and what I've learned over the years, I have developed my humble project leadership system.

I hope it will help you reflect on yourself and succeed as a leader. As I told you before, please take it as a potential first step to reflect on your behaviors, and you will definitely be able to improve this model.

My suggestions are as follows:

1. Read my model slowly

2. Analyze it
3. Discover if you are practicing some of the components
4. Criticize it
5. Improve it
6. Succeed as a leader
7. Please never forget the sentence “YOU COULD BE MY TEACHER,” and you will learn something every day.

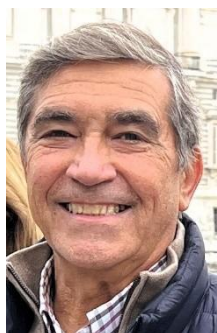


Today is a great day to start, and Tomorrow will be better.

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