
Projectland Goes to the Movies

From Heroes to Team: What *The Avengers* Teaches Project Leaders¹

Dawn Mahan and Jerry Manas²

In our [previous article](#), we introduced the **Four Ps** for turning a memorable movie moment into a practical project lesson:

Clarify the PURPOSE. PICK the Scene. Name the PATTERN. Prepare to PIVOT.

This month, we put that approach to work with a familiar Projectland challenge: a group of highly capable people who are not yet functioning as a team.

Most projects include “heroes.” They may be senior engineers, functional leaders, subject-matter experts, executive sponsors, or other key stakeholders. They bring expertise, strong opinions, and a desire to make a difference. That is a tremendous asset—until individual agendas, competing priorities, egos, personality clashes, or unresolved conflict become more powerful than the shared goal.

Marvel’s *The Avengers* gives us a memorable illustration of this dynamic. Before the heroes can save the world, they have to stop fighting one another long enough to become a team.

1. Clarify the PURPOSE: Helping a group of individuals work toward a shared goal

The purpose of using a movie moment is never simply to entertain a group or prove that the facilitator has good taste in films. Instead, begin with the project situation you need to address.

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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.](#)

For instance, what if you need to help a project team recognize that its problem is not a lack of talent or capability, but a lack of alignment.

Misalignment among A-team players is common in Projectland. A technical lead may be protecting quality and maintainability. A business leader may be pressing for speed and customer impact. Finance may be focused on the business case and financial benefits. A sponsor may be looking for visible progress. You can see where this is going. Each person's agenda can be reasonable in isolation yet still create friction collectively.

The project leadership question is not, "Who is right?" It's, "What will help these talented people direct their strengths toward the same outcome?"

The answer should be specific enough to matter. "Deliver the project successfully" is not a compelling shared mission. "Prevent a customer-impacting failure before the regulatory deadline" or "create a simpler onboarding experience that reduces abandonment" gives people something specific to rally around.

A useful question is:

"What challenge are we trying to solve that none of us can solve alone?"

Begin by explaining a clear, truthful picture of the common outcome or threat that requires cooperation. It may be a customer problem, a competitive pressure, a regulatory deadline, a strategic opportunity, or a risk to the benefits the project was designed to deliver.

That is the purpose behind this lesson from *The Avengers*: leading a collection of heroes become a team that can work together toward a common goal (or against a shared enemy).

2. PICK the Scene: The moment the heroes are not a team

Now that you've clarified the purpose, it's time to pick the scene that best illustrates the challenge.

In the middle of *The Avengers*, Earth's mightiest heroes are anything but united when they're assembled by S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury to confront the powerful god, Loki, who's come to take over the planet. On the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier, they argue, posture, question each other's motives, and jockey for position. Their individual capabilities are extraordinary, but

their interactions are unproductive. They're fighting each other more than they're fighting the actual threat. *Check out the pre-team-Avengers-mode [clip on YouTube](#).*

Sound familiar?

Many project teams face a less cinematic version of the same situation, minus the capes. The meetings may not include a thunder god, a green rage monster, or a suit of armor, but they can still involve territorial behavior, dueling priorities, unspoken resentments, and debates about who has the authority to decide.

Then comes a turning point. After the team learns Agent Phil Coulson was killed by Loki, Nick Fury uses Coulson's death to rally the group around the threat they must confront together. The heroes begin to focus less on their differences and more on the larger purpose that connects them.

The necessary shift is unmistakable: moving from "Who is in charge?" to "How do we win together?"

3. Name the PATTERN: From heroes to team

The pattern, or common challenge, beneath this scene is ego versus shared purpose—or, more positively, from heroes to team.

When individual experts are not aligned, their strengths can become liabilities. Confident expertise turns into competition. Healthy debate turns into entrenched positions. Important decisions slow down because people are defending their domain rather than advancing the work.

A project leader who recognizes this pattern can name it without blaming anyone. Rather than saying, "You people need to stop fighting," they might say:

"We have strong people with legitimate perspectives. But are we acting like a collection of heroes—or like one team with a shared mission?"

That's a much safer and more productive conversation.

The Avengers example also helps leaders distinguish between capability and collaboration. A project may have the right people on paper and still struggle because it lacks shared priorities, decision clarity, mutual trust, or a common understanding of what success looks like.

The team doesn't necessarily need more talent. It needs a stronger reason—and a clearer way—to work together. You need to turn individual strengths into visible dependencies.

Ask each key person or function to identify three things:

- The unique contribution they bring to the shared outcome.
- What they need from others to succeed.
- Why they need it.

This simple exercise shifts the conversation. It reminds heroes that their expertise matters, while making interdependence visible. The technical lead may need clear and unchanging requirements. The business lead may need a realistic picture of delivery capabilities. The sponsor may need early warning when risks threaten the expected benefits.

The goal isn't to erase differences. It's to highlight the value each hero brings to the table, and to help them see the value these differences bring to the team.

4. Prepare to PIVOT: Rally around reality, not drama

The final P is to prepare to pivot: identify one practical behavior, agreement, or decision that helps the group respond differently.

In *The Avengers*, Fury's tactic to bring the team together is effective dramatically. He uses Coulson's death—and (SPOILER ALERT) hides information about Coulson's possible recovery—to create a shared emotional commitment. It makes for a compelling turning point.

In Projectland, however, leaders should be cautious about copying this approach. Trust is difficult to build and easy to damage. While there are hopefully no murders in your organization to exploit, it can be tempting to use manufactured drama, selective truth-

telling, or exaggerated urgency to rally the troops. Don't. It may generate short-term compliance, but it rarely creates durable commitment.

The real lesson is not “find a tragedy and use it.” It's to help your heroes see the genuine stakes they already share, and pivot to create a healthy culture where they can be their best selves while working collaboratively toward the shared goal. In other words: use real stakes to create urgency, not manufactured drama.

If there had been a feeling of friction or outright hostility, the pivot you need is establish “real stakes, no spin” norms. Projects need candor, especially when the pressure rises. Agree that people will raise concerns early, distinguish facts from assumptions, state decisions clearly, and avoid surprising one another with bad news.

This is where the movie moment can help. If a team begins to drift into blame, competition, or territorial behavior, a leader can ask, “Are we stuck in pre-team Avengers mode?” The phrase creates a memorable shorthand for a difficult dynamic and can redirect the conversation without targeting an individual.

Curtain call: Are your heroes on the same side?

The next time a project meeting feels more like a contest among competing experts than a coordinated effort, pause before adding another process, dashboard, or escalation path.

First, ask whether the real issue is alignment.

- Do we have a shared outcome that matters to everyone in the room?
- Do people understand how their strengths and dependencies fit together?
- Are we facing real stakes honestly, or are we relying on pressure and drama to make people act?
- What is one behavior that would help us move from solo heroes to a high-performing team?

A project doesn't need superheroes. It needs capable people who see the same mission, respect one another's contributions, and understand that the work cannot succeed through individual brilliance alone.

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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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