

Wondering whether you have what it takes to be a project manager? Here are ten signs that you're never going to make it to the top of the project hill.

10 Reasons You're Not Ready

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I see it everyday -- talented programmers, system technicians and project engineers being promoted to project manager. You may very well be a skillful, seasoned engineer, but parlaying that talent to project management is hard to do. And your first project is how you'll be judged.

The most important step you can take toward becoming a project manager is to get your name on the list - or, more to the point, not to get your name crossed off the list. Speak to your boss, peers, and managers so the word gets out that you want to be a project manager. Besides my own experience, I've spoken with CEOs, executive recruiters, and other consultants, who consider the merits of prospective PM's. You need to heed their advice and follow their tips in getting yourself ready for that first project.

One black mark from this list - or even more - won't necessarily ban you from the project manager position for life; all of these "ten sure signs" can be addressed, in time, if you're willing to invest the effort. You might also argue that a number of my signs conflict with each other. Should you stand up to the boss, or should you tone down the ego? Should you get more involved with operations, or should you lighten up on the tech certifications? Finding the right mix of skills for your career is a lifelong pursuit; here's a good milestone to see where you stand.

1. You Really are Still a Technician

There's more to being a PM than getting the code right, configuring an operating system or designing a data center. IT technicians, however skillful, can't rise to the top without practical management experience. Good project managers have always been strategists and goal-seekers, no matter the size of the project. Only a technician would fixate on the latest hardware and software while ignoring day-to-day PM issues like schedule, costs and team resources. Remember, from a business point of view, a technician is a necessary expense, not a vital asset.

2. You Can't Handle Project Politics

When a company has many capable techies, one of the things that allow one to rise to the PM spot is the ability to manage the politics of the business **and** the project. A winning PM possesses the "executive presence" to juggle the concerns of project constituents - the stakeholders, company management, accounting departments, programming managers, infrastructure engineers, clients, vendors, subcontractors, and employees - without being skewed one way or another.

Executive management has to trust the numbers and the project manager. That means more than simply managing the project downward, a PM must also "manage upward," presenting facts and ideas to company executives and boards of directors. On occasion this might mean standing up to a CEO. A project manager who decides to play it on the safe side, or is outmaneuvered because of a lack of political savvy, will likely find himself or herself in a weaker position the next time around. Too many managers pay homage to their bosses rather than engaging them. The PM needs to be able to argue a point with the stakeholders or executive management and not shrink away the next time they meet. They form a team bonded partly by respect and trust, and partly by chemistry and other intangibles.

3. You've got a Swelled Head

Dealing with stakeholders and corporate management requires self-assurance, but all too often, bright managers are cocky, strong-willed, and overconfident. Project managers with big egos tend to overlook little things, or things they deem insignificant. Swelled heads can lead to missed opportunities, when information about those "little things" ceases to flow through the project team.

Even well-intentioned managers can be hurt by their egos. The worst kind of arrogance is the type that covers up insecurities. Why? Managers with this particular failing, squirrel away information as a power play, releasing only half-truths or partial facts so they remain in control of their team - but again, leading to missed opportunities for the project and the company. And even worse, they have a hard time accepting blame or admitting errors.

4. You've got No "Heart"

Cowardly lions need not apply. Most executives have their fair share of basic integrity, but a project manager needs enough "heart" to stay the course under pressure.

To some extent, a PM's job is to reign in their star performers. This fortitude to expose potential problems takes "managerial courage"; in other words, having the mettle to "do the right thing." It's more than just speaking up; it's having the confidence to fix things, too.

5. You're Too Content with the Status Quo

Letting things brew and dealing with them later is an approach best confined to a Starbucks Mocha Latte; it's certainly not the mark of a successful project manager. Sometimes taking the initiative with a problem means stepping out of the manager's role to become, for example, an estimator, a scheduler or WBS creator.

6. You Don't Care Enough about Company Operations

Project managers have to understand what's behind the numbers. They need to become counselors and advisors. Worthy PM candidates don't view management as an isolated function, they see past the numbers to explore how a project can help usher in business improvements.

A prospective PM needs to dig into the lessons-learned from previous projects. If the manager is still learning about business, the learning curve is already too long. A PM candidate hoping to join the club should be more of a teacher than a student.

7. You're the "Quiet One"

If you can't step up in front of a large group and speak about your project's finances, schedules and goals, you won't make a good PM. Eloquence may not be essential, but you've got to be good on your feet. Regardless of deft negotiating and public speaking skills, a PM should have the confidence and expertise to weather any crowd. Join Toastmasters to learn some of these skills.

8. You're Not a Leader

Without the intangible ability to lead - the mortar that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts - an aspiring PM will fall short of the mark. On a strategic level, PM's excel in the areas you might expect, skillful negotiator, competent communicator, talent assessor, leader, team builder, and planner. I look for PM candidates who are results-driven, not process-driven. PM's who are too inflexible about their procedures and reporting structures often allow those processes to turn into an end in themselves. That inflexibility not only stunts the project, but also shuts the door on the manager's ability to rise to the next level. Successful PM's see beyond the processes to prevent tomorrow's problems.

9. You Don't Know When to Stop

You can't be afraid to stop a project if the original reasons for the project are no longer sound. What if you lose your sponsor or other important stakeholders? What if the ROI no longer merits this work? It is far better to terminate a project early than to push through to the end with a product that satisfies no one and has exceeded budgets dearly. If it is not going to work, stop it.

10. You've Stopped Learning

Although you may have a great deal of "book-learning," project managers are forced to learn the hard way what causes project failure. Project managers need to be able to admit their errors, correct them, and avoid repeating them. Your education does not stop with your degree or certification - it's only the beginning.

Achieving project success is more than simply enacting a methodology standard or carrying out a set of template-driven exercises. Success is achieved through the intelligent application of sound principles guided by experience. If this sounds like common sense, it is.

Knowing the rules won't guarantee that you'll rise to the top, but at least you won't set up roadblocks for yourself along the way. Corporate politics is a game, first and foremost. Failure to play by the rules will almost always result in your being sidelined, no matter how good you are at your work. Prospective PM's who don't see it that way may simply not be ready.

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