

**A Sixth Sense for Project Management®**  
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**Abstract**

A growing body of evidence in the project management profession is recognizing a need for a more comprehensive and balanced approach to ensure project success. That balanced approach includes what is commonly known as “soft skills” or what Roeder Consulting refers to as **A Sixth Sense for Project Management®**. The advent of the project management profession more than 40 years ago was based in science and quantitative measurement, undoubtedly a vital skill set needed to define the initial expertise of a project manager. However, due in part to a high project failure rate over time, a cultural shift is currently taking place – resulting in a new era for project management, one that can refocus project managers toward a higher success rate. This paper reveals mounting evidence that suggests project success is reliant on project managers using a balanced approach that requires: 1) technical skills learned from *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, 2) **A Sixth Sense for Project Management®**, and, 3) business acumen. It establishes how **A Sixth Sense for Project Management®** fits into the project management discipline as a whole (what it is, why it is important to project managers, and why a balanced approach is absolutely critical to the success of today’s projects). Lastly, it introduces the six disciplines of **A Sixth Sense for Project Management®**: 360° Awareness, Whole Body Decisions™, Clear Communication, Adaptability, Diplomacy and Persistence.

**Introduction**

**A Balanced Approach**

Project Management can be defined as turning strategy into results. How do you turn strategies into results? Part of the answer is the tools and methodologies learned in the *PMBOK® Guide*, referred to in this paper as “technical skills.” However, the *PMBOK® Guide* and the technical and process skills it represents cover only one of three legs essential for a project manager to achieve successful results.

Project managers who focus solely on technical skills may find themselves in a constant struggle to obtain executive support, as well as support of fellow colleagues and team members. When Project Management is defined more broadly, as a balanced approach with three distinct skill sets, project managers will realize better results. Project Management is a tool to get results. In and of itself it is not a complete tool to guide successful change.

The crucial second leg of this balanced approach is the human component – the people side of projects, one that is often overlooked. It is what Roeder Consulting refers to as **A Sixth Sense for Project Management®**.

The third and final leg is business acumen. Business acumen refers to the skills and knowledge of specific types of projects worked on. Wikipedia, “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” includes this definition: *Business acumen is a concept pertaining to a person's knowledge and ability to make profitable business decisions.*

By incorporating these three balanced “legs” in a project managers’ skill set, the individual will be better equipped to take responsibility for their projects, as well as its results.

**After Four Decades, the Industry Acknowledges the Importance of People Skills**

Since the profession’s beginning, as reflected by the founding of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in 1967 and the Project Management Institute (PMI®) in 1969, project management has primarily focused on a quantitative, analytical, straight-line approach to project management. Even after 40 years of formal approaches to project management, a high percentage of projects still fail. Successful project management requires a solid understanding of how people react to change and what to do about it.

Today, “Sixth Sense” people skills, often referred to as “soft skills,” are a critical component of every project manager’s tool kit. Good people skills help project managers build better relationships, communicate more effectively and gain confidence and respect. Of course, people skills have always been necessary, but now it is finally being recognized.

For instance, Appendix G of the *PMBOK® Guide, Fourth edition*, acknowledges the importance of these interpersonal skills in the practice of project management. It states:

*Project managers accomplish work through the project team and other stakeholders. Effective project managers acquire a balance of technical, interpersonal and conceptual skills that help them analyze situations and interact appropriately. This appendix describes important interpersonal skills such as: Leadership, Team Building, Motivation, Communication, Influencing, Decision Making, Political and Cultural Awareness, Negotiation. While there are additional interpersonal skills that project managers use, the appropriate use of these skills assists the project manager in effectively managing the project.*

This statement clearly indicates that interpersonal skills are an essential ingredient to project success, especially in an era when project managers are being asked to do more every day.

The *PMBOK® Guide* defines the processes and deliverables but does not provide the “how to” of managing a project and especially does not deal with people management. The fact that the *PMBOK® Guide* provides only five pages of clarification on these skills indicates that the understanding of these skills is just beginning in the project management world. It does not go far enough to properly prepare individuals for success. Forty years of project management doctrine offers little or no training on these fundamental “Sixth Sense” skills. **As we enter this new era for project management, the training and maintenance of people skills will become just as important as technical skills.**

Exhibit 1 (below) visually demonstrates how project managers can successfully use the balanced approach, combining “Sixth Sense” skills, technical skills and business acumen as the means to turning strategy into results.

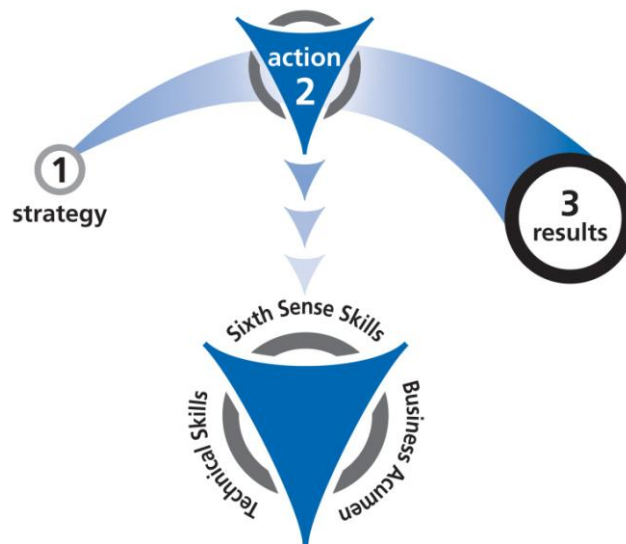


Exhibit 1 – A Balanced Approach

### **A Sixth Sense for Project Management®**

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Originally published as a part of 2009 PMI Global Congress Proceedings – Orlando, Florida

## How It Evolved

My background in strategy consulting led me to become a Project Management Professional (PMP®). With my newly minted PMP® certification, I thought that I now knew how to manage projects and therefore how to lead change in an organization. Then I found a blind spot. The blind spot was in understanding and managing the human side of change. After conducting market research, I realized other project managers had the same blind spot. So, Roeder Consulting interviewed project managers to address this glaring need for further training. Project managers were asked, “Outside of the technical skills required to manage projects (skills such as drafting charters, earned value, work breakdown structure), what are the skills that you would most like to improve upon?” Common responses included:

- What do the stakeholders really want?
- How do I know if people really support this project?
- Should I communicate this in detail or at a high level?
- How do I help executives understand what we’re doing?
- How do I help non-executive project managers understand my role (response from some project managers at the executive level)?

In 2006, during a strategy session at the Roeder Consulting office, our team analyzed this market research. It seemed to me that some of these issues required a little bit of ESP. We were trying to figure out what the appropriate nomenclature was. It was broader than people skills, different than technical skills, beyond business acumen. We looked at the list and pondered. Then, I had what some might call a “Eureka” moment. I jumped up and said, “It is almost as if project managers need a *sixth sense* for project management!” We coined the term, A Sixth Sense for Project Management®, and it has been the core of our training programs ever since.

## Sources of Project Failure

Depending on the particular research study read, anywhere from about 40 to more than 60 percent of projects fail – an abysmal track record. As a profession, it is clear that fundamental changes must be established. A large part of the solution is to focus on a balanced approach. Becoming competent in all three of the areas will lead to increased project success.

Projects are about change and change is not possible without people. Given the lack of attention to people skills, it is not surprising that most projects fail. Project failure can often be traced to project managers with inadequate people skills. Why do projects fail? Roeder Consulting conducted further research to answer that question. We looked at research from the Standish Group Report titled “*CHAOS*,” appropriately named because it discussed project failure which often results from and/or leads to chaos. We also conducted Internet research in a variety of areas. A reoccurring theme arose – as a profession we need better people skills. **Until we embrace people skills as a required part of the project manager’s tool kit, we will continue to see an environment where most projects fail.**

## Sources of Project Success

PMI commissioned a multi-million dollar, multi-year study titled, “*Researching the Value of Project Management*.” The study, conducted by principal investigators Janice Thomas, PhD, and Mark Mullaly, PMP®, through Athabasca University in Athabasca, Alberta, Canada, asked the following question, “Is there value in project management?” The study found that there is, indeed, value in project management.

However, there is not always value in project management. Sometimes, the discipline of project management actually destroys value. This occurs when the project management approach is not appropriate to the environment. How can one determine which approach is appropriate? It is about awareness of self, people and the surrounding environment. It is about staying in tune with what is going on around one’s self. Becoming versed in A Sixth Sense for Project Management® is a primary tool to gaining this awareness and ultimately long-term success.

The findings of the study were published in 2008 in the book, titled with the same name, *“Researching the Value of Project Management.”* After the report was published, I contacted co-author Mark Mullaly, PMP. I invited him to comment on the importance of people skills and business acumen. In his e-mailed reply, he said, *“Certainly, in our findings, the ability of project managers to engage in critical thinking skills, to understand the business, and to respond in ways that are situationally appropriate are critical to those organizations that are realizing significant value.”*

This scientific research further validated what Roeder Consulting has advocated since 2006 – that is, organizations that support extensive leadership training and people skills training tend to deliver *more* project management value. The fact is, when equipped with “Sixth Sense” skills, a project manager is much more likely to add value to the organization.

In 2006, VitalSmarts™ and The Concours Group partnered to examine project failures and the role of communication – what they call conversations. Their study titled, *“Silence Fails: The Five Crucial Conversations for Flawless Execution,”* found that fewer than one in five project leaders effectively engage in the crucial conversations needed to solve problems, although as it points out, the good news is that one in five does.

Yet in each of the key problem areas, the study also found a clear difference between speaking up and speaking up *well*. While about half of leaders make some attempt to speak up, most are ineffective.

Some speak up, but water down their concerns, so the issues are never fully aired. Some speak up, but do so in a way that provokes defensiveness from others. Only a handful - about one in eight - are able to share their full concerns and feel their views are understood.

According to the report, the lesson to be drawn from this is simple: "Unless and until leaders take measures to ensure their environment is conducive to holding crucial conversations, a significant number of these issues will remain unaddressed, invisible, and fatal." Certainly, this is not a conducive environment for project success.

## Sixth Sense Disciplines

Roeder Consulting’s research shows many project managers realize they have a blind spot. They know people skills are important but are not sure where to turn for answers.

Today, a multitude of books and courses are available that deal with soft skills training both for personal and professional development. However, only a few target project management, indicating that this blind spot is not yet well understood in the project management discipline as a whole.

All of Roeder Consulting’s project management training programs are built around six foundational disciplines that, together, define A Sixth Sense for Project Management®. The six disciplines are: **360° Awareness, Whole Body Decisions™, Clear Communication, Adaptability, Diplomacy and Persistence.** Keep in mind, these disciplines are a journey towards personal enrichment and professional success, unique to each individual.

### First Discipline: 360° Awareness Tune Your Radar To People and Situations



Learning to simultaneously gain self awareness, read non-verbal cues, and sharpen skills of perception in various situations, in order to assess project support and/or potential problems.

**Second Discipline: Whole Body Decisions™**  
**Use Your Brain, Heart and Gut To Make Great Decisions**



Using decision making that encompasses a whole body approach, that is, one that aligns heart, head and physical self to make the best decisions.

**Third Discipline: Clear Communication**  
**Communicate Straightforward Thoughts, Words and Images**



Achieving effective communication by using simple, clear and succinct language and visuals, so others understand the message conveyed.

**Fourth Discipline: Adaptability**  
**Adapt but don't Break, be a *Chameleon With A Core™***



Learning to adjust to any situation, while maintaining core beliefs and values.

**Fifth Discipline: Diplomacy**  
**Unearth Common Ground and Influence Outcomes**



Combining all of the other disciplines to find common ground when conflict is inherent in a project.

## Sixth Discipline: Persistence Melt Obstacles and Visualize Success



Training one's self (and the team) to keep the project moving forward, despite road blocks.

### Moving Forward in this New Era

Our world, more than ever, needs people who can successfully lead change. In a May 2008 report from the Economist Intelligence Unit, titled, “*Talent wars: The struggle for tomorrow’s workforce*” executives were asked, “Which skills or knowledge do you think will be critical to your organization’s success over the next three years?” The top three answers were: ability to deal with and manage change (68%), ability to think strategically (45%), and communication and interpersonal skills (41%). Clearly, there is an intense need for project managers to demonstrate business acumen and A Sixth Sense for Project Management®.

Forty years of project management doctrine has provided solid technical skills. Now, it is time to focus on the long overdue “Sixth Sense” and business acumen skills: a balanced approach to project management.

In the first six months of 2009 I delivered this message to over 1,200 project managers across eleven cities in the United States and Canada. I discovered a community of project managers warmly embracing this call for balance in how we manage and lead change. One of my favorite responses came out of the key note speech I delivered at Boston’s professional development day. A project manager in Boston said our message “restored my belief in what I do ... I’m really happy to see the acknowledgement that project management is not only about technical [skills], procedures, rules, but first of all it’s about people.”

Together, we can and we will improve our profession’s record of success. Our path to success requires each of us to develop and maintain a balanced approach consisting of: 1) technical skills, 2) people skills (A Sixth Sense for Project Management®, and 3) business acumen.

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