

The unwritten rule of Project Management: It's Not About Performance, It's All About Power

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Today I am writing a very personal article, looking back at essence of what has made my career journey as a project leader a success. Or perhaps, if I am honest, not as successful as it could have been!

In the project management world, we often focus on the mechanics of our work: budgets, schedules, risks, and stakeholder management plans.

We're trained to believe that success hinges on our ability to execute these tasks flawlessly. I've spent years operating under this assumption, meticulously tracking every detail and diligently communicating with all the key players. Believing that if I delivered the project on time and within budget, my performance would speak for itself.

However, a recent article I came across, reinforced my long-held beliefs, arguing that power, and *not* performance, is the true currency of influence within an organization.

"It Was Never About Performance. It Was Always About Power," by April Little articulated just that and it got me to thinking.

Despite the ominous title, this isn't about being a corporate Machiavelli; it's about recognizing the **invisible currents of power** that shape decisions, career trajectories, and for those of us in the project well, ultimately, our project outcomes. This isn't a cynical take on the workplace; it's a pragmatic one. And it's a lesson I've learned the hard way, through both successes and failures.

The article's core message resonated with me deeply. It highlighted how power often resides in places you don't expect: the experienced executive assistant who controls the CEO's or stakeholder's calendar, the trusted deputy who is consulted behind closed doors, or the team member who "recapitulates" meetings and shapes the narrative.

For years, I mistook job titles for authority, only to be baffled when a seemingly minor player derailed a project or when a well-reasoned proposal I put forward was quietly ignored. I was focused on the formal structure, oblivious to the informal networks that truly held sway.

It's a realization that has fundamentally changed how I now approach my role as a project manager, and indeed as a CEO watching my executive team and middle managers jostling for power. I have, and not before time shifted my focus from not just **what I do** to **how I influence**.

Here are a few key takeaways from my journey that I believe are crucial for any project manager, current as well as future leaders navigating the complex world of organizational dynamics.

1. Identify the Real Decision-Makers

Your stakeholder map is a starting point, but it's not the full picture. The person with the biggest title isn't always the one making the final call. The real power players are often the people who control access to information, influence others' opinions, or have the ear of senior leaders.

Actionable Insight: *Look for clues.* Who do people turn to for an informal gut-check? Whose opinion seems to carry disproportionate weight in meetings? Who is the trusted advisor that leaders confide in? Once you identify these individuals, make it a point to understand their perspectives and build a professional relationship. Their support can be far more valuable than the formal approval of someone who simply signs off on a document.

2. Master the Art of Context and Framing

I used to present project updates with a focus on raw data and metrics—"We're on track, the budget is X, and the milestones are A, B, and C." I thought this objective approach was the most credible. But looking back I realize the folly of this. The person who frames the information controls the narrative.

Actionable Insight: *Don't just report the facts;* frame them in a way that aligns with your stakeholders' goals. Before a meeting, think about what really matters to each key player. Does the Head of Marketing care about the technical details, or do they care about the impact on customer acquisition? Does the CFO care about the project timeline, or the return on investment? Tailor your message to their interests and priorities, not just the project's. This is how you move from simply reporting progress to influencing decisions.

3. Leverage Your Allies Strategically

There were times when I tried to push a project forward alone, believing my individual performance would be enough to overcome resistance. This often led to frustration and setbacks. I am reminded that influence expands when you make other people look credible. Take note, this is one of the most critical insights.

Actionable Insight: *Don't go it alone.* Identify your champions and advocates. Support your manager's vision and connect your work to their strategic goals. When you make a team member or a peer look good in front of leadership, they are more likely to advocate for you in return. Building these reciprocal relationships and informal alliances is not about playing politics; it's about building a robust support system that can carry your ideas forward, even when you're not in the room.

My journey as a project manager has been a constant evolution. I've learned that technical proficiency is the price of entry, but understanding the human dynamics of power is the key to unlocking true success.

It is not about being underhand, unethical or Machiavellian. I am not advocate for creating toxic environments. I want my teams to be happy and to thrive on the positivity that is collaborative working,

However, it is more than just leading with a project plan, and as aspiring leaders we must endeavour to forge beyond the surface level interactions and instead engaging with the unwritten rules of the organization.

By understanding these subtle power structures, we can not only improve our project outcomes but also better position ourselves for personal as well as professional growth.

It's no longer just about managing the project; it's about strategically navigating the organization.

What informal power dynamics have you observed in your own organization, and how have they impacted your work?