

Career Compass: Learning to Influence Decisions Before They Become Problems

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Many project managers believe their role begins once a decision has been made. A direction is set, funding is approved, priorities are agreed, and the task becomes delivery. Yet some of the most successful project professionals understand a different reality: projects are often won or lost long before execution begins.

In 2026, one of the most valuable personal development skills for project managers is learning how to **influence decisions before they become problems**. This means spotting risks early, shaping conversations proactively and helping stakeholders see implications before they turn into issues.

Why Late Influence Is Expensive

Project managers frequently find themselves dealing with the consequences of decisions they had little involvement in making. Unrealistic timelines, unclear objectives, resource constraints and conflicting priorities often arrive as established facts rather than open discussions.

By the time these issues appear on a project plan, changing them becomes difficult.

The earlier a project manager can contribute insight, the greater their ability to protect outcomes and reduce risk.

Move Upstream in Conversations

Developing influence starts with becoming involved earlier. Instead of waiting for formal project approval, seek opportunities to understand the thinking behind strategic decisions.

Ask questions such as:

- What assumptions are driving this approach?
- What constraints are being considered?
- How will success be measured?

These conversations help project managers understand context while also providing opportunities to introduce practical delivery considerations.

Spot the Signals Others Miss

Project managers often sit at the intersection of multiple teams, giving them a unique perspective. This position allows them to identify patterns and tensions that may not be visible to senior leaders.

Perhaps two departments are working towards conflicting objectives. Perhaps a proposed timeline depends on an unconfirmed resource. Perhaps a key dependency is being overlooked.

Influence often begins by helping others see what is already there.

Frame Concerns Around Outcomes

People rarely respond well to criticism, but they do respond to clarity. When raising concerns, focus on outcomes rather than objections.

Instead of saying:

"This won't work."

Try:

"If we proceed this way, the risk is that delivery slips by six weeks. An alternative approach could reduce that exposure."

The conversation shifts from resistance to problem-solving.

Build a Reputation for Thoughtful Input

Influence grows through consistency. Stakeholders quickly learn which voices add value and which create noise.

Project managers who bring balanced observations, practical recommendations and well-considered questions build credibility over time. Eventually, they are invited into conversations earlier because their perspective is trusted.

Learn the Difference Between Influence and Control

One of the most important lessons is recognising that influence does not guarantee agreement. Stakeholders may hear your advice and choose a different path.

That does not mean the influence failed.

The goal is not to control every decision. It is to ensure decisions are informed by the best available insight.

Develop Commercial Awareness

The strongest influencers understand the wider business context. They connect delivery implications to cost, value, customer impact and organisational priorities.

This broader perspective makes recommendations more persuasive because they align project concerns with business objectives.

Create Space for Better Decisions

Not every contribution needs to be an answer. Sometimes influence comes from slowing a conversation down, asking the right question or highlighting an assumption that has not been tested.

Good project managers solve problems. Great project managers often prevent them from appearing in the first place.

Career Compass Takeaway

As projects become faster and more complex, influence is moving from a desirable skill to an essential one. Project managers who learn to engage earlier, ask better questions and shape conversations before decisions are locked in create better outcomes for both their projects and their organisations. In 2026, career progression will increasingly belong to those who don't just manage delivery, but help shape the decisions that determine it.