

# 10 Project Hacks: Do More with Less

By Maria Latimore



**Today's competitive environment demands that nonprofit organizations do more with less**, while increasing their program service delivery. Project Hacks help to streamline operations and grow productivity, thereby increasing organizational. By using these techniques, you will gain the benefits without spending significant time and money implementing full-blown formal project management processes and training.

**Project hacks are small easy-to-do baby steps that help you to efficiently complete valuable projects and operational tasks** that meet mission critical business needs, at the right time with the right people. These hacks strike the right balance between process and action. There's enough planning to organize the work and get stakeholders aligned on the goals, but not so much that it slows down the action and becomes just another box to check.

**A good way to begin is to use these hacks with small projects or in your day-to-day operational work.** The hacks are listed in the order of importance. If you want to start small, start practicing #1 and once you're seeing the results of it, move on to #2, 3, etc. The efficiency gains will appear early and often, and will motivate you and your team to take it to the next level.

## **1. Value Relationships**

**Principle 1 of SMART Conversations® is “Connecting Precedes Content.”** Successful working relationships are at the heart of successful, less stressful projects so it's important to spend time to get to know people so that you can develop mutually trust-based relationships.

**So how can you do this?** First be flexible and learn how best to work with each stakeholder. This doesn't mean fundamentally changing who you are, but keeping your focus on the goals and adapting as appropriate to get the best out of yourself and everyone else. Trust comes from your words and actions, so be thoughtful about what you say, and how and when you say it, and follow through on your commitments.

**To succeed you need to work effectively and get support from all your stakeholders.** So, remember to build relationships across all levels within your organization and externally. Think about how you'll create relationships with your peers, teams, staff, partners, vendors, senior managers, regulators, and others.

**Many people see developing and maintaining relationships as an intangible soft skill that's nice to have,** but secondary to doing actual work. Simply calling it a soft skill minimizes the importance of it. Creating goods relations is an intrinsic *part* of your real work as it's

crucial to do your job. Regardless of your role, building relationships is the most important thing that you can do to get stuff done. Putting it off because you have “real work to do” is a sure recipe for failure.

**The importance of relationships hit home for me while working on my second project right out of college.** We were working with remote developers and having a hard time meeting our milestone dates. Everyone knew that a previous bad experience with the “home office” had caused feelings of dis-trust for the remote team members. The team didn’t gel and these bad feelings played out to negatively impact team dynamics, and yet for the first 3 months we ignored them and plowed ahead with the work.

**Then we hit a crisis and realized that we would not succeed if we didn’t stop to talk about the elephant in the room and how people felt.** This conversation cleared the air and we agreed to hit the reset button and start over to build a supportive team. This wasn’t a magic bullet, but simply acknowledging the issues and pledging to respectfully work through them cleared up people’s attitudes and helped us to begin hitting our dates.

**Building relationships is fundamentally and essentially related to communicating.** To build relationships with people you must communicate with them.

## **2. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate**

**Too many projects fail because information is not effectively shared with the right people at the right time.** Figuring out the best way to share information, what the right time is and who the right people are can be challenging, but if you don’t continuously focus on it your projects will suffer. My mantra is “whenever possible be transparent

and share information.” When people have more information and they’re listened to, they’ll feel vested and accountable in the work.

**Everyone can tell a story about communication gone awry.** How many times has something that you said been misconstrued (and maybe you didn’t know it until much later)? How many times have you said to someone “Oh, I thought you knew meant ...”? Have you ever casually found out that you should have been told about something 2 months ago, but weren’t? These communication problems are rampant and confirm that a great deal of project leaders time is spent on communicating.

**A lesson I’ve learned from hard experience is to not assume that people have the information that they need.** In the rush to get stuff done, we may assume this, but when we stop to confirm it, it’s surprising how often they don’t have it. Whether it’s small thing like a team member out one day for training or something major like a software deliverable being late, stop often and ask yourself if you have information that needs to be shared.

**Then take the time to share and discuss it with the appropriate people.** The effort made to keep people informed will go a long way to helping you create great working relationships with them.

**A major communication task for project leaders is to continuously talk with key stakeholders** to determine if everyone is still on the same page about the project scope and goals. If not, it’s very important to find time to get the team re-aligned on scope, goals, roles and responsibilities. Equally important is to gain consensus on the impact of any changes.

**How you communicate is also important.** Using multiple mediums based on people's preferences will make it more effective so ask key stakeholders how they prefer to get information. Whether they want it via email, phone, text, or in person, try to meet their needs whenever possible. Also, explore all the forums that may be available to you for sharing information. There may be a regular staff meeting or other forum that you can leverage to efficiently communicate to a specific audience.

### **3. Listen Well**

**Listening, asking and talking are the 3 elements of conversation and the communication process.** However, listening is so important and often done so poorly, that it deserves it be called out. With busy lives and shortened attention spans, it's harder than ever for most of us to stop and really listen to others.

**A Harvard Business Review study<sup>1</sup> found that “good listening was characterized by the creation of a safe environment** in which issues and differences could be discussed openly.” Interestingly, this was also the number one factor to promote team effectiveness found in a Google study<sup>2</sup> (see item 8).

**By “empathizing with and validating feelings” good listeners make speakers feel like they're really being heard** which engages them more into the conversation. I've made a conscious practice to slow down and quiet my thoughts so that I can concentrate on listening. I try to focus on the words, intonation, and body language; in other words, to think about listening. It sounds easy, but it's not.

**The HBR study showed that “people perceive the best listeners to be those who periodically ask questions that promote discovery and insight.”** So, unlike what most of us think, it's not so much about not

talking, but talking at the right time and making constructive comments in a non-judgmental way.

Consistent effective listening will improve the response and engagement from others and enhance your relationships.

## **4. Be Intentional**

**Intention and Impact.** These are easy words that we know, but let's look at the dictionary definitions.

**Intention:** an aim or plan or a determination to act a certain way

**Impact:** the effect or influence of one person, thing, or action, on another

**In every situation, our aim and effect determine whether our relationships and communications with others are good or bad.** It's good to get into the habit of thinking about our intention and impact, but it's especially important to do so in difficult situations. It's about planning what we need (intention) and thinking about what to say and how others will perceive it (impact.)

**Some questions to reflect on are ...**

- What do I want to achieve?
- Given the current circumstances, what do I want at the end of this interaction?
- Considering the people and human dynamics what do I want my impact to be?
- How are others likely to perceive my impact? What do I need to say and do to have the impact that I want?

**If our intention is not to resolve problems, but to be right, to win or be in control** we're setting up a win-or-lose situation that isn't likely to

engender trust or enhance relationships with others. When crises occur, tempers may rise. Focusing on your intention and impact can keep you composed to help you to say and do things that resolve, and not exacerbate these messy situations.

**In addition to thinking about intention and impact when working with people, we also need to be intentional in how we use our time** by prioritizing and being cognizant of it. At the end of each day, decide on 1-3 critical things that must be done tomorrow (use your project schedule to help select critical tasks.) During the day stop and take stock of the progress made on those activities. If you've worked on everything but those items, refocus to minimize distractions and get them done.

**Minimize meeting time by evaluating which meetings you really need to be in and which people really need to be in your meetings.** If you're not giving or getting substantial information in a meeting you may not need to attend. The most important meetings solve problems and remove roadblocks, and aren't just to report status and re-hash what's happened.

## **5. Just Enough Planning**

Adequately planning your project can go a long way to delivering the goods. Adequate planning is about doing just enough planning before acting on it. The effort involved in just enough planning will vary based

on the project's complexity, size and timeline, but you should always create a high-level roadmap defining its agreed upon scope, goals and business reasons. It also means documenting, the key activities, key people, and timeline to execute the project.

**Working with key stakeholders, prepare a simple project scope document outlining the problem,** the proposed solution and business value of it. Define what will and will not be accomplished, and the success criteria. Refer to the scope document to acknowledge when the scope changes and to determine the change impacts.

**You don't need to learn to use a fancy project management tool like Microsoft Project,** but you do need to document your plan. In my first job out of college, many of today's tools didn't exist. We deployed successful projects by simply creating lists of the tasks that need to be done, the people responsible for them and the start and end dates. You can do the same by preparing a list in Excel starting with just your milestones; a list of the major tasks and deliverables such as define project scope & goals or train staff on new software.

**To align and focus your team and other stakeholders, review your draft plan with them and ask for feedback.** Don't be surprised when they start adding, deleting and changing the tasks, dates and responsible person. Soon you'll have a more comprehensive schedule to help you to keep track of the work.

**As you start executing your project, use this plan every day to understand your status.** Where is the project, is it where should be? Regularly review the status with your team, and as changes occur, update your plan. Tracking your project's status is an important activity and is covered in detail in #10.

**When you facilitate meetings prepare yourself and others by sending out agendas and pre-work in advance** to give people adequate time people to review and complete. Make a habit of starting and ending on time; persistent latecomers will soon get the message and change their behavior. Gain team consensus on ground rules and hold people

to them. To stay on track, stash off-agenda topics in a parking lot list to discuss later (and equally important, follow-up on necessary items.)

## **6. Deal with Change**

**As you get into the detailed work your project will change.** Because the objectives get clearer and unexpected obstacles occur, change is normal and should be expected. When change occurs, first stop and *acknowledge* it. Then evaluate and assess its impact on your project. Will the change affect your deployment date, does it impact the project scope and goals (in major or minor ways), should team roles be revised or new people involved?

**Plan time into your schedule to analyze these and other potential changes.** At the start of the project you won't know exactly what changes will occur and their impact, but use your experiences and your stakeholder's to best determine the likely changes and build time into your plan to handle it. You won't get it 100% right up front, but simply doing the exercise with your team gets everyone thinking about the potential for change and gives you some buffer in your timeline. By assessing potential changes you're proactively managing risks (see item 8.)

**If your project will change how people work, talk with your executive sponsor to prepare a plan to help people deal with change.** As project manager, you may or may not have responsibility for implementing a change management process, but will likely be one of the key people with knowledge about new roles and responsibilities, skills and processes that must be deployed because of the project.

**How these changes are communicated and rolled out can profoundly impact people's buy-in and therefore project success.** It's hard to over-communicate this information (see item 3 above!) so prepare a

plan to explain the change impacts consistently and concisely to all impacted stakeholders.

## **7. Contingency Planning:**

**Thinking about potential risks and solutions ahead of time can minimize their impact if they become real issues.** Take a small step towards risk management by preparing a simple list of the biggest risks for your project and what the options would be if any of them actually happened.

**Spend ½ hour with your team brainstorming and documenting risks and solutions.** Lots of good information will come to light and you'll probably be pleasantly surprised by the insights gained. How would the project be impacted if the vendor delivers 6 weeks late? What would you do if a critical expert team member left the organization? Having this information in your back pocket can cushion the blow and lessen the stress of issues.

**As you execute the project keep your team updated on the status of the risks.** Periodically go review your risk list with them to see if anything should be added, removed or changed.

## **8. Team Effectiveness**

**Achieving effective teams is a critical to delivering successful projects.** Effective teams have a strong sense of connection and support each other. They are committed to their goals, and typically achieve them. I've found that creating an environment to set teams up for high effectiveness can be challenging and think that it's important to share the research and my thoughts on it.

Google's research<sup>2</sup> found that "**Who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact**, structure their work, and view their contributions." In other words, the group norms around how members behave and operate have the biggest impact on how effective teams are. Google found that these 5 factors that are key to having highly effective teams.

**Psychological Safety:** Team members feel to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

**Initially many of us are probably surprised that this is the most important factor to team effectiveness.** But, when you think about it, it makes a lot of sense, as feeling safe impacts all aspects of our work life; and all aspects of personal lives too!

**Google defines psychological safety as team members feeling safe to take risks around each other.** "They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea."

**I suspect that we've all had times at work where we really want to ask a question**, but feared that it would be viewed as too basic or make us look uninformed. In those situations, wouldn't we have loved to be in a safe environment where we wouldn't hesitate to speak up? Wouldn't we want to always feel that way?

**Dependability:** Team members get things done on time and meet a *recognized* high bar for excellence.

This factor is obvious; effective teams accomplish work at a high level. I added the word "recognized" to the definition because to meet a standard of excellence, people must know what it is and understand that they're expected to achieve it.

**I think that like people, great teams, have great resiliency.** They understand that they have difficult work ahead of them and will face barriers, but they have a stick-to-it attitude that they can do get the hard stuff – and they do!

**Structure and Clarity:** Team members have clear roles, plans and goals.

**Team members often proceed as if they understand their roles,** but after the project is over the lessons learned often reveal that people were confused about their responsibilities. They weren't as clear as they needed to be about what they were supposed to do versus others on the team. Often, they didn't feel safe raising this concern, so this ambiguity caused confusion and slowed down the work.

**While I agree that it's important to clarify team roles and responsibilities by establishing SMART goals,** I also feel that leaders need to be open to people taking on new responsibilities as their interests morph and skills develop. By doing hands-on work and interacting regularly with team member's leaders will have the pulse of what's going on, who's doing what and be ready to adjust things accordingly.

**Meaning:** Work is personally important to team members

**Google states that “the meaning of work is personal and can vary:** financial security, supporting family, helping the team succeed, or self-expression for each individual, for example.”

**Regardless of how each of us defines meaningful work,** we want the effort expended on work to really matter. I believe that we're happiest at work when we're doing work that we care about.

**Impact:** Team members think that their work matters and creates change

**While much media attention has been given to millennials' need to do work that matters to them,** I think that this is true not just for millennials, but for most people.

**I've had too many conversations with team members of every generation** who feel that it's often difficult to see the impact of their work on a regular basis. We spend a lot of our waking hours working, and we need regular validation that all of that time amounts to something that makes a difference.

**Leaders striving for team effectiveness must care about this issue as much as the others.** I challenge them to work with their teams to find creative and effective ways for team members to see the impact of their work and feel that it matters. This evaluation may uncover that the wrong work is being done or the approach is inappropriate, and can be the catalyst to resolve this problem.

## **9. Lead by Example**

**Lead by example by doing hands-on work on your team's projects.** It's a good way to increase member's engagement and effectiveness. And you'll also get to see the action and details from your team's perspective, which will give you a better appreciation and understanding of their daily work and interactions. This insight could prove invaluable in helping you to uncover small problems and solve them before they become big.

**Model behavior that you want.**

**My experiences on teams, and building and managing them,** lead me to think that these factors are key, but would with an obvious caveat.

Specific projects require that team members have certain skills and experiences. For example, you can't ignore that you need someone experienced in program development for at-risk middle school students or financial modeling. Once the team with the right knowledge is in place, leading by example will power team engagement.

## **10. Monitor and Report Status**

**Your project plan is the roadmap to your destination of project success.** Use your plan to stay on top of your status so that you'll know where you are in completing the milestones and finishing the project. Mission critical strategic projects require that the status be known

**Your project sponsor is a key stakeholder whose role is to work with you to successfully deliver the good.** Your sponsor should help to remove roadblocks, resolve resource issues and communicate organization-wide strategy and directives. Tracking project status lets you tell your sponsor and other stakeholders sooner rather than later about problems and delays.

**Project managers must manage expectations and communicate effectively with all stakeholders** in their management hierarchy and those external to the organization. Both good and bad news should come from project managers, and they should ensure that stakeholders, especially sponsors, are informed about progress and issues as soon as possible so that they're not blindsided.

**Status reports can be as simple as reporting on if you're on target with your milestone dates,** issues, estimated percentage of project completed and whether you're on track to complete it on time.

## **Conclusion**

**Creating a project hack culture can jump start project management best practices in your organization.** You may want to start by selecting 1-2 hacks and tailoring them to help with the specific challenges your organization is facing. Once you're comfortable using a few of them and start seeing results, add on some of the others.

**And don't forget to celebrate your project's success!**

## **About Maria Latimore**

Maria Latimore...

1. <https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do>
2. <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/five-keys-to-a-successful-google-team/>