



# Principles of Relational Project Management

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Prioritising people in projects

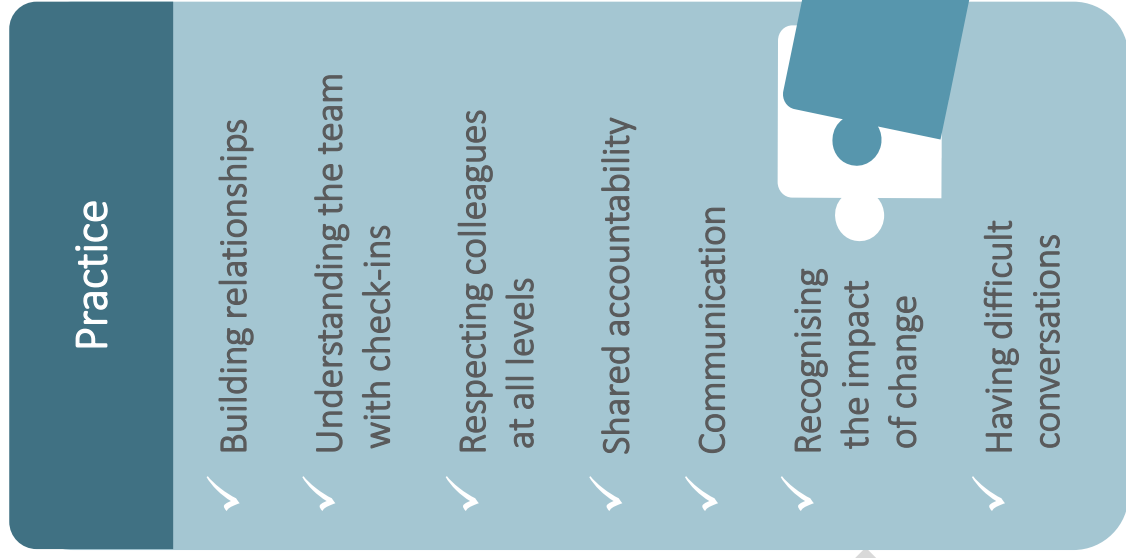
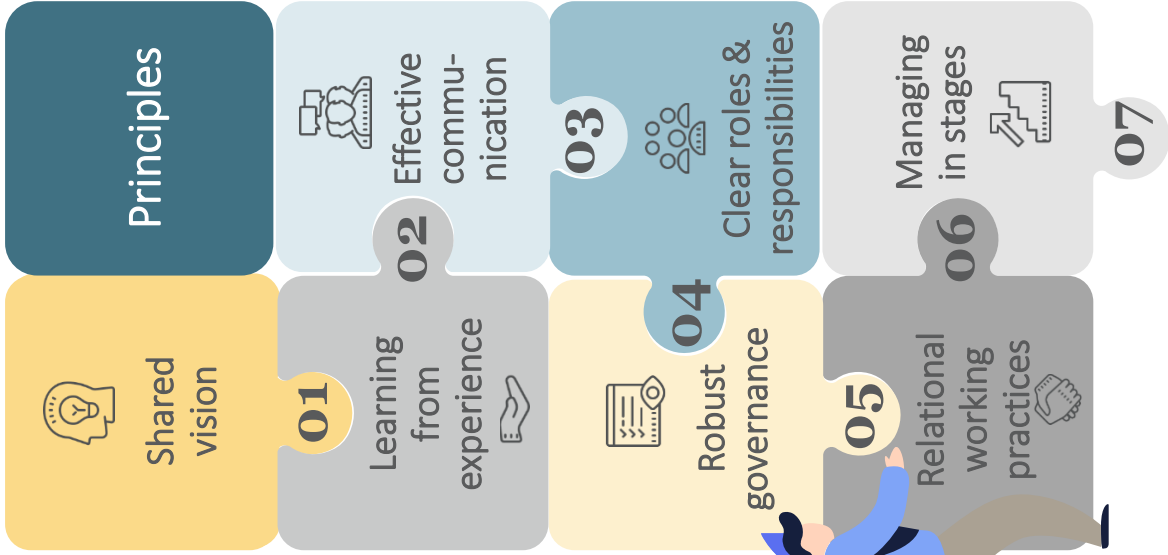
An overview

John Copps

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Relational working practices



Stakeholder management | Project initiation | Governance structures  
Project planning | Risk management

# Introduction

## Putting human relationships at the centre of projects

There is a lot written about how to do project management. Almost all of this focuses on the processes of structuring, organising and overseeing projects. The rigours of these processes are necessary and good, but they are not enough to deliver a successful outcome.

**Process is vitally important but is secondary to people.** Processes will only get you so far. The real key is to have the whole project team and stakeholders onside, working for the same outcome, focused on their tasks, and enjoying themselves.

This document is written from the perspective of Mutual Ventures' experience managing complex projects in the public sector. It starts from the central principle that projects are about people.

We set out the core guiding principles of what we describe as **relational project management**. This isn't intended to replace or contradict other well-known and established approaches such as PRINCE2. Instead, it works with them to provide a new lens through which to view projects based on the centrality of human relationships.



## Why relational project management?

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The concept of relational project management was sparked by the realisation that relationships with and between colleagues, stakeholders and partners are what makes or breaks the success of a project.

Over the last decade, Mutual Ventures has undertaken dozens of projects across government agencies and the wider social sector, working with colleagues from different professions, including children's services, healthcare, and urban regeneration. In all these cases, relationships have been at the heart of change.

Despite this, we have found that pressure to deliver on time and to budget, means that 'process' often takes over. But when projects go wrong, the root cause is almost always relationships going wrong.

This underpinning ethos of relational project management is similar to that of 'relational practice', an approach now commonplace in professions including social care, nursing and teaching. Relational practice promotes relationships with clients, families, colleagues and others as the key to successful services

## What is project management?

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A 'project' is a temporary organisation established to deliver a set goal or outcome. Projects are always set within the wider environment of an organisation (or group of organisations), and the existing culture and politics.

Project management is about the delivery of agreed project outcomes by guiding and overseeing the required tasks and conditions the project team works in. The role of the project manager comprises:

- ▼ Holding an overarching view of what is needed
- ▼ Working with people to get things done
- ▼ Ensuring quality and timeliness
- ▼ Making the best use of scarce resources
- ▼ Managing and mitigating risk

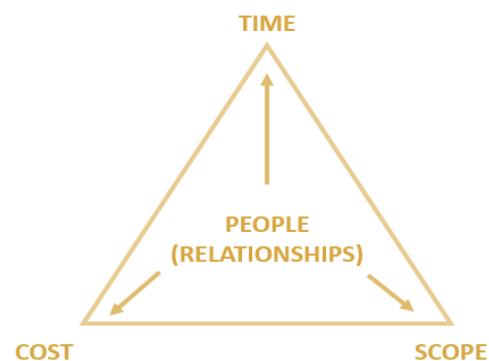
# What is relational project management?

Simply put, relational project management puts human relationships at the centre of projects.

Relational project management is about establishing and embedding the conditions to get the best out of people. It recognises successful outcomes rely on respectful, healthy relationships, and a belief in resolving difficulties. It acknowledges that relationships do not exist in isolation, but are interrelated and influence each other across a project and beyond. Project processes deliver outcomes only through these relationships.

Much of the literature on project management focuses on three key constraints on every project: scope, time and cost. To these variables, relational project management adds 'people'. This reflects an understanding that relationships are central to success, and that are critical to managing and influencing the other project constraints.

In addition, relational project management recognises that the process of working through a project is often critical to the outcome. More often than not, people involved in delivering a project are also the ones that will live with the change it creates. What this means is that if a project is difficult or painful, even if it is completed on time and to budget, then it may not achieve the desired outcome.



**PEOPLE ARE CENTRAL TO THE SUCCESS OF EVERY PROJECT, AND CRITICAL TO MANAGING AND INFLUENCING THE OTHER PROJECT CONSTRAINTS OF SCOPE, COST AND TIME.**

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The key question in relational project management:



Is the nature and quality of my relationships helpful to achieving the goals of the project?



Good project managers ask this question all the time.

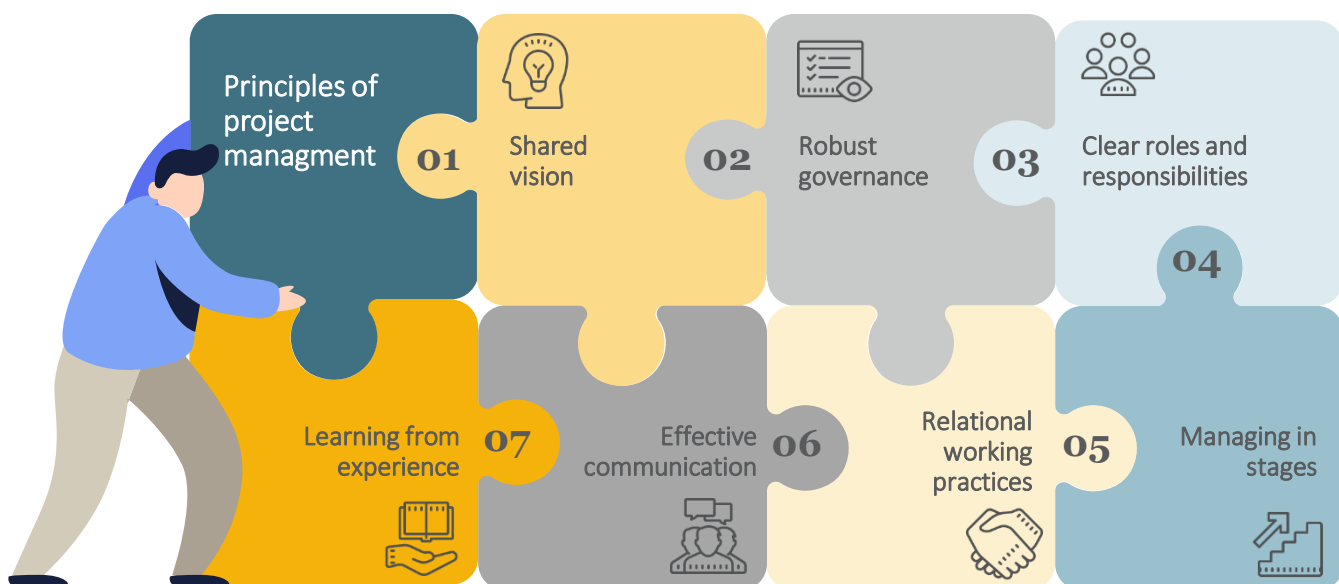
This question recognises how relationships are central to the outcome of every project.

Asking this question will help you to act in a way that helps to build positive relationships, identify any issues early, and create a culture of understanding across the project.

# Principles of relational project management

Relational project management relies on the same best practice principles that will be familiar to anyone that has practiced project management, but with a recognition of the primacy of human relationships.

When applying these principles, relational project managers must be sensitive to the project environment, existing relationships between stakeholders, and adapt to suit the type of project.



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## 01. Shared vision

Ensuring that project goals are well-defined, all stakeholders have a common understanding of them, and there is a shared sense of purpose.

Relational project management recognises that stakeholders will

approach the project with different expectations and priorities. For the project manager, the focus must be on understanding these differences and actively managing and influencing them.





## 02. Robust governance

Project governance provides the framework in which decisions are made. It determines the oversight processes, sets limits on delegations, and defines the mechanisms for escalation and change, in order to ensure accountability.

Relational project management ensures that all relevant stakeholders are represented in the governance of the project, and those impacted by the project have a chance to influence it.

This includes listening to and giving a voice to groups who may be overlooked (e.g. service users or staff).



## 04. Managing in stages

A project plan divides tasks into manageable parts and deliverables, with responsibility allocated to the person(s) best placed to complete them. Groups of tasks can be divided and managed as 'work streams'.

Relational project management recognises the skills and abilities of team members, and values their expertise. All tasks are understood in the context of the whole project with their dependencies on other tasks mapped out.

Managing tasks and managing people are part of the same job, and understanding individuals' motives and priorities is critical to getting things done.



## 03. Clear roles and responsibilities

Everyone working on the project has an understanding of the nature of their involvement, their responsibilities, and to whom are they accountable.

Relational project management relies on individuals to deliver tasks but also emphasises shared responsibility. In the event that roles change, the project manager needs to ensure resilience in the team. Key to success is team members' understanding how their work interacts with others, and making everyone accountable to each other.



## 05. Relational working practices

Creating a culture where colleagues work with each other, rather than tell each other what to do.

Responsibility for building and nurturing relationships on a project doesn't just sit with the project manager – it is a whole team responsibility.

We describe some of the good practice in more detail below.



### 06. Effective communication

Regular formal and informal meetings will ensure everyone remains up-to-date on progress and allow any issues to be identified and resolved as early as possible.

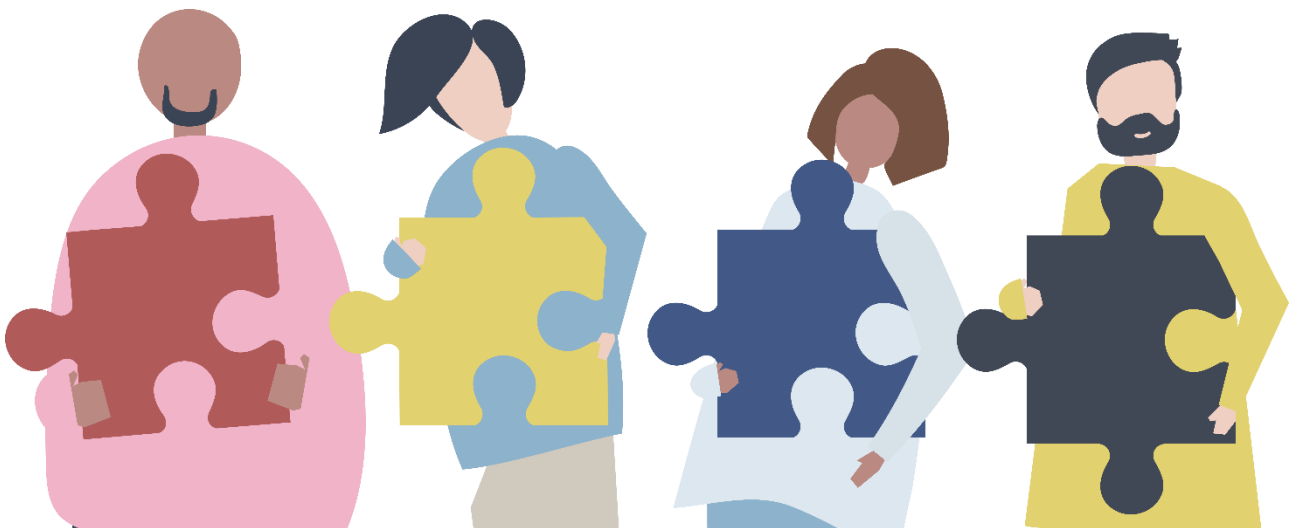
Relational project management relies on clear and consistent messages, but tailoring communication to stakeholders depending on their proximity to the project and what action is expected from them.



### 07. Learning from experience

Ensuring a project management approach that is appropriate to the setting, being flexible as necessary and learning as you go. Project managers should be ready and willing to adapt, and no project management approach should be applied as presented in a textbook.

Seeking ongoing feedback through open, honest discussion among the project team is an important feature of relational project management. As circumstances change and the impact on stakeholders become clear, the project team must be willing to be flexible and learn from mistakes.



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## Case study: Developing a sense of shared responsibility

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A sense of shared responsibility for a project outcome has to begin from the outset, as a recent Mutual Ventures project to support a council improve an underperforming service shows. Our first engagement with the council's in-house project team was to run a half-day workshop to develop a high-level project plan. We started with a blank sheet of paper and asked the team to map the tasks required to get to an agreed project outcome.

The exercise began with a 'work stream-by-work stream' plan but quickly broadened to a group discussion about the links between work streams, and the dependencies between them. The end result was a plan the whole team had contributed to, and where it was evident that it relied on everyone to deliver as a shared endeavour. The workshop was also useful to build relationships within the team, many of who had not spoken to each other before.



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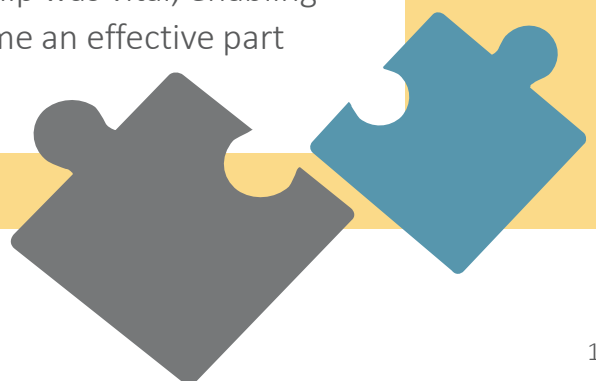
## Case study: Recognising the impact of change

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Mutual Ventures worked on a complex project, which involved working with an internal team within the client organisation. Mid-way through the project, a new client lead took over, replacing a manager our team had established a good relationship with. Initially, it seemed like the new manager was slow to pick up the work leading to concern that the project would be affected.

Taking a relationship-focused view of this, the Mutual Ventures project manager realised that the new lead had a tough job. The project manager took the decision not to let the relationship deteriorate but to meet and discuss the matter. The first meeting was tense, but in a second meeting the colleague opened up – saying she had not been fully briefed, was afraid to ask too many questions, and that she knew that the previous project lead had got on well with the team and worried that she could not replicate that. The Mutual Ventures project manager and new lead talked about what to do. The MV project manager admitted that he had not put in enough effort to introduce the lead to the team and project, and both agreed she should ‘shadow’ some upcoming meetings, and have an established team member work alongside her for a period of time.

In this case, understanding the perspective of the new project lead and building a relationship was vital, enabling her to feel more informed and become an effective part of the team.



# Applying relational working practices

Relational project managers actively work to create a culture where colleagues work with each other.

Here we outline how project managers can apply relational working practices in their interactions with colleagues on a project.

## Building relationships

Relationships often must be built quickly. From the outset of a project, you should be a role-model and set clear and realistic expectations. The high expectations of project staff must be matched by the behaviour of the project

manager, so that people know what to expect of you and what you expect of them.

Everyone has their own style and way of relating to people. Good project managers know this about themselves and their colleagues, and can adjust their behaviour to get the best out of a team.

## Tips for building trust within a project

- ▼ Do what you say you are going to do, for example by being on time to meetings
- ▼ Look for 'early wins' to establish your credibility
- ▼ Be open. Invite people to contribute ideas.
- ▼ Encourage feedback and don't be afraid of challenge. Work on creating a safe environment where people can share their thoughts and ideas, and voice concerns.
- ▼ Be humble. Be honest about what you do and don't know.
- ▼ Recognise expertise in others and give credit where it is due

## Understanding the team with 'check ins'

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Successful projects are those where team members have a good understanding of each other, and acknowledge when they either are able to give or would benefit from support.

One simple but effective way of doing this is to do a 'check in' at the start of a meeting.

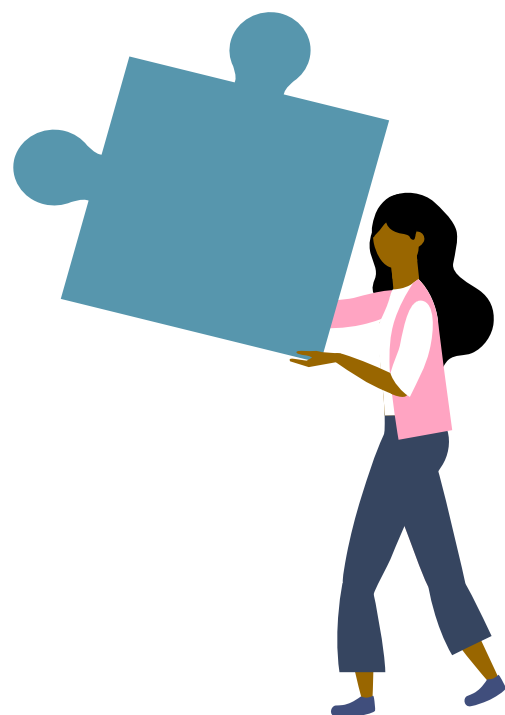
Check ins are a way of asking each other 'how are you?' They recognise that we are all human and how we arrive at a meeting is affected by our physical, emotional and mental state. A difficult journey to a venue, knowing a relative is seriously ill or headache can impact on our ability to participate effectively.

Check-ins create a little bit of space to remind ourselves we're human, set a positive tone, and start off on the same page.

Check ins do not need to take long but will help recognise when members of the team are not at their best and establish a positive and supportive atmosphere in the group.

If team members do not know each other well, checks ins do not have to be personal. For example, a group could ask each other: 'what do you hope to get from today?' or 'share something you get to do in your job that you really love?'. However, as a team becomes more established, the check ins can become more humorous, for example 'what animal were you when you woke up this morning?', 'if you had a remote control with only one button that controlled something in your life, what would the button do?', or 'what three words would your best friends use to describe you?'

At the end of a meeting a check out can also be used to end the meeting on a lighter note.



### Respecting colleagues at all levels

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The strategic governance structure usually contains the decision-makers. A project manager must invest time in developing a good relationship with them and establishing appropriate channels of communication, both formal and informal. It is wise to identify who the gatekeepers around senior stakeholders are, for example for getting into diaries or securing extra short-term resource if required.

A good project manager ensures that strategic stakeholders are well briefed ahead of key meetings and, even when things go wrong, there are no surprises. A good project manager manages upwards as well as downwards.

At an operational level, the project manager will work with a wider team on a day-to-day basis. This team may contain a mixture of seniority, skills and expertise, drawn on at different points in the project lifecycle. A good project manager ensures there are effective working relationships with all members of the team and respects each contribution.



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Alongside the core strategic and operation teams, there may be a range of external audiences, partners and suppliers impacted by the project. Project managers must think broadly about the people and organisations who can impact on or will be impacted by the project. Stakeholders might include service users, the general public and regulators, as well as less obvious groups such as the families of team members. Stakeholder mapping is a useful tool to ensure that you identify all important individuals and groups from the outset. Stakeholders should be prioritised, and a plan can be developed for each group.

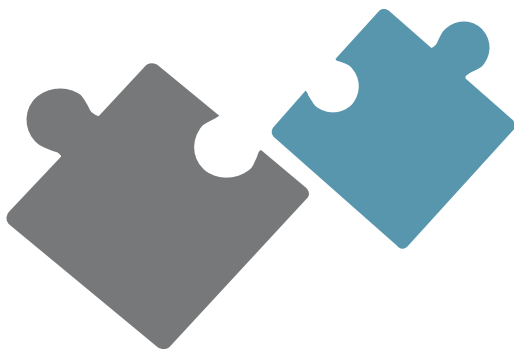
### Shared accountability

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The delivery of a project is a team effort. Relational project managers recognise that, and regularly remind their fellow team members of this fact. This will mean that expectations for high performance are shared across the team.

At its best, this is about creating an environment where people are passionate about what they do, see the purpose, and have each other's back. Team work to identify issues and seek solutions together. This tends to be much more effective than the project manager doing this on their own.

Where there is slippage in the project, the project manager should be wary of team members ganging up on colleagues or 'scapegoating'. The project manager must be solutions-focused and seek resolution to problems, not try to apportion blame. However, where underperformance is consistent then the project manager must address this swiftly and take appropriate action.



### Communication

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Good communication is essential to any relationship. In the context of project management communication must be clear and regular, and encouraged in order to support effective relationships and so that issues can be identified and addressed as early as possible.

Formal communication should take place through the defined project governance procedures, including meetings, written reports and dashboards. Informal communication channels are more difficult to define but include 'corridor conversations' or unplanned phone calls or emails.

A key principle underlying all communications is that project managers should seek to promote 'one version of the truth'. This means ensuring that all parties hear consistent messages, reducing the likelihood of any misunderstanding.

A relational project manager encourages good communication of all types, but with an inclination for more 'personal' means of engaging with each other. This usually means preferring a meeting or phone to a written email, encouraging colleagues to go for a coffee, and beginning and ending meetings with saying 'how are you' and listening to the response.



## Recognising the impact of change

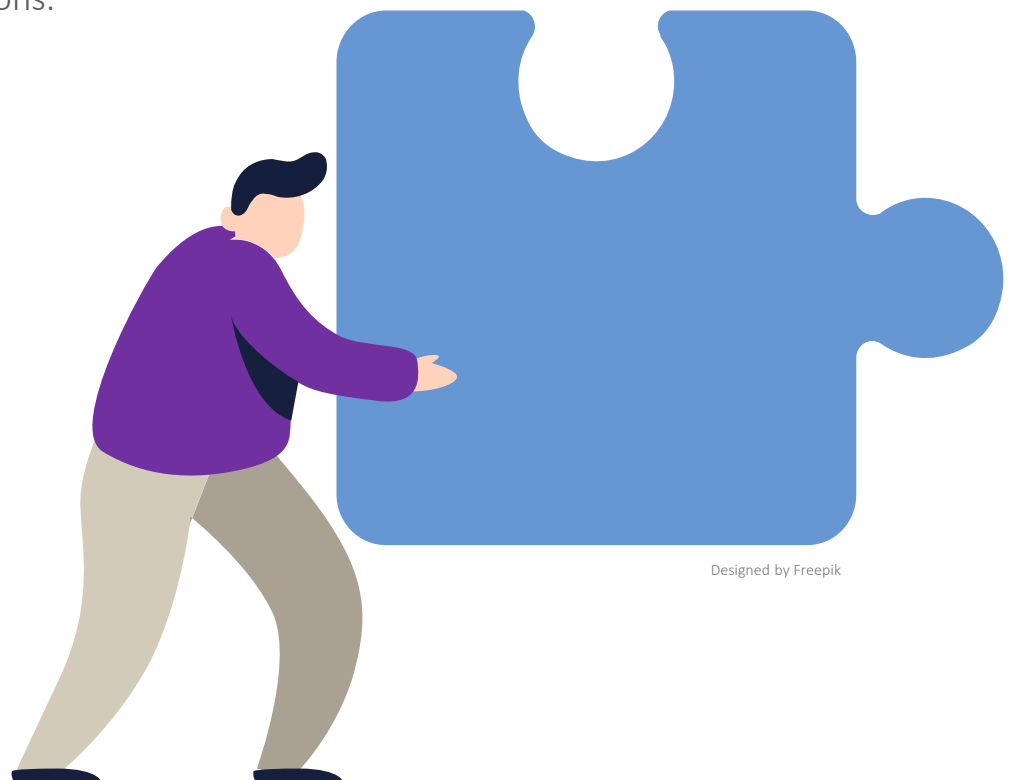
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Relational project managers recognise that many people find change hard. In response to change, there are usually three different groups of people to consider: those that are excited about change, those that are resistant to change, and those that don't care either way. Each of these groups requires a different strategy to manage, which will depend on the individual project and circumstances.

It is also important to understand that there are lots of factors outside of project managers' control that will influence how people engage over time. Particularly on long projects, individuals may experience profound change in their lives related to their health, jobs, families and financial positions.

All this may have a knock-on impact on the project. Relational project managers recognise this complexity and that an emotional response to change is normal. This may often explain people's behaviour, even if it doesn't excuse it.

Of course, expectations of high performance is a requirement from everyone on a successful project, but being open and understanding is important so that a conversation can happen.



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## Having difficult conversations

A focus on building positive relationships does not mean difficult issues can't be spoken about, or that underperformance has to be accepted. In fact, in a project where there is good relationships and communication, it is much harder to hide or maintain poor performance.

In this case, it is the job of the project manager to identify and address the problem, and take appropriate action.

The key to having a difficult conversation is being genuine in what you are saying and having respect for the person you are taking to.

Conversations should take place person-to-person where possible and the other party given a chance to respond. Before any conversation ask yourself: What do you want from this communication, and what would success look like?

Only once you've had a conversation should you then make a decision on how to proceed, respecting the appropriate governance processes and setting out your reasoning in clear and factual terms.

### Advice for structuring a difficult conversation

- ▼ Be upfront and honest about what you want to talk about
- ▼ Look for mutual purpose: something positive you can agree on
- ▼ Start by acknowledging the other person's perspective, even if you disagree with them (e.g. 'I can understand why you say...')
- ▼ Share your factual evidence clearly and concisely, rather than giving your opinion
- ▼ Be conscious of your language (and body language). Some phrases are likely to create a negative reaction (e.g. 'What you've got to do/understand is...' or 'With respect...')
- ▼ Listen and take an interest in their response

# Case study: Adapting project delivery during a pandemic

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The Covid-19 pandemic provided a test for projects everywhere. Mutual Ventures was managing a large transformation project in a local authority where members of the team had a variety of challenges, including illness, getting food and medicine to older relatives, home-schooling children and managing mental health issues.

The strengths of the relationships on the project and commitment to open communication helped us to quickly appreciate these issues, the limitations they imposed, and how we needed to adjust the project. Early conversations and dialogue allowed us to reshape the plan, propose changes to the timescales, tasks, and quickly inform senior decision-makers through established informal and formal communications channels.

Key to solving these issues was also a sense that we were 'in this together' and encouraging team members to appreciate the constraints on each other, but also the impact these constraints had on each other.



# Case study: Hearing the voices of all project stakeholders

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Mutual Ventures was commissioned to undertake a major national programme involving bringing local authorities together to deliver services on a regional basis. The programme was controversial among stakeholders as it represented a challenge to the status quo.

Strong focus on the existing relationships and understanding the sensitivities was critical to establishing a governance structure where all stakeholders had a voice and could influence the process, even if they weren't direct decision-makers. This appreciation led to the inclusion of groups that were used to being treated as external to the project, for example, a number of regions included representatives of service users on strategic governance boards.

Having all stakeholders 'inside the tent' promoted understanding, surfaced tensions that would otherwise remained hidden, and led to a more negotiated and sustainable outcome.



# Making project processes relational

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Process and structure remains a critical component of any project. In relational project management, the difference is not that they are less important or that there are fewer, but that they aim to support good relationships on the project.

The key processes and structures required to deliver a successful outcome are outlined below.

## Stakeholder management

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The important of relationships is the starting point for relational project management. At the outset, project managers should undertake a comprehensive exercise to understand all stakeholders on a project, and develop a plan to manage their relationships. Key elements of this exercise should include:

- ▼ A stakeholder map – a description of all the individuals and groups impacted or in a position to influence the project.
- ▼ A relationship action plan – a clear list of tasks, which shows what is required to communicate with each stakeholder and manage their involvement. Each stakeholder and task should have an owner within the core project team.
- ▼ Individual meetings with stakeholders – the project manager should request to meet with key stakeholders, to begin to develop relationships, describe the project plans and give reassurance, and establish a direct line of communication.

### Project initiation

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The best time to define goals and set expectations is at the outset of the project. In relational project management, project managers should ensure that period at the start of the project has an explicit focus on building relationships. The project team should meet to agree ways of working and ensure a common understanding of the goals.

Project initiation should also involve the formal agreement and recording of key aspects of the project. This will provide a guide to team members and a fixed point to return during the project if issues arise.

We recommend the following documents:

#### Project initiation documents

- ▼ Project vision and outcomes – a concise description of the agreed project vision and outcomes
- ▼ Who's who – a list and mini-profile of all team members and key stakeholders
- ▼ Roles and responsibilities – a description of what each team member does and to whom they are held accountable
- ▼ The project plan (see below) – an ordered list of tasks, with resources, timescales and responsibilities. The plan should include a summary, as well as break down by work stream (if relevant)
- ▼ Risk register (see below) – a 'document that captures the key risks and mitigations against these risks

## Governance structures

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Project governance provides oversight and accountability for the project, and clarity on how decisions are made. The role of governance structures is to steer the project, oversee delivery, and ensure risks are managed.

There are two core levels of governance, which will look different in different projects:

- ▼ Strategic – the process of setting the vision, providing leadership and oversight, and ensuring accountability
- ▼ Operational – the process of oversight and management of the day-to-day operational delivery and management of the project, including structure of work streams.

A key principle of relational project management is that governance should be proportionate to the size, complexity and risk associated with the project. The right people should be involved at the right levels, and reporting processes should provide the level of detail and assurance needed. Regular updates and progress reporting should be accompanied by reporting by exception on key issues and risks.



## Project planning

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The project plan describes what tasks need to be done, how long they will take, when they need to be done, what resources are required, and who is responsible. It breaks down activities into manageable chunks. This plan should also include dependencies between activities and a mapping of the 'critical path', or the flow of sequential dependent activities required to complete the project.



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A project plan can be created in MS Project, MS Excel or a variety of tools, depending on the requirements of the project.

In relational project management, the plan is a tool and guide to support the project manager and team. It is not there to do the job of the project manager. Project managers know that the plan changes and have to manage this.

A core function of the project governance is to manage risk. Risk comes in many forms but, in the context of a project, will impact the outcomes, budget and timescales.

A risk register is a vital document within any project, to provide a formal process of identifying and recording risks, and making sure project stakeholders have a clear and straightforward understanding of the risks and potential impacts. Risks should be prioritised in a way that ensure that they are managed effectively, with emphasis on the top risks. It is no good having a detailed risk register of 30+ risks if the strategic leaders can't name the top three risks.

The risk register should be 'owned' as part of the strategic governance of the project.



# Case study: Promoting good project relationships on a day-to-day basis

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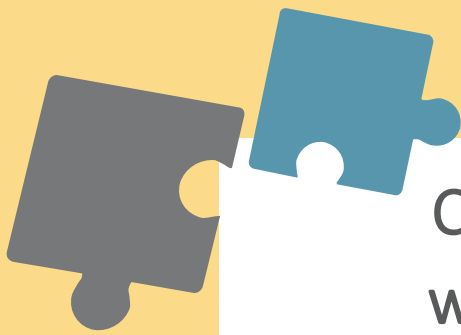
Good relational project management is about what you do on a day-to-day basis, as part of the routine. Mutual Ventures' work includes a conscious and deliberate effort to remember the importance of relationships. This includes emphasis on regular verbal communication, either face-to-face or using MS Teams (with the camera turned on!).

From the outset, project managers invest in getting to know colleagues, their interests and working out what we have in common. Meetings start with 'check-ins', which provide an opportunity for all participants to speak, build relationships and to ascertain how individuals are feeling. We also make the effort to give praise when a job is well done, or constructive feedback where there are lessons to be learnt

Both by role modelling these behaviours, and in our one-to-one and group discussions with team members, we always try to promote them across the project – encouraging team members to give credit where it is due, or offer their support when things don't go to plan.



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## Case study: Managing when things go wrong

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Mutual Ventures worked on a high-profile project in a local authority that needed to be delivered to strict deadline. The project was overseen by a board of senior stakeholders, chaired by the chief executive of the council. The project manager had worked hard at the start of the project to build a relationship with the chief executive, provide accurate and honest information, and clear briefings before meetings. A trusting relationship between the two was developing.

Several weeks into the project, during a routine team meeting, it became clear that a critical project task had been overlooked. On learning this, the project manager quickly undertook to establish the scale of the problem, its impact, and whether any immediate mitigation activities could be started. The impact was almost certainly a delay and any fixes were likely to take time. Immediately, the project manager sought to speak directly to the chief executive to provide early notification, admit the mistake, and provide assurance that solutions were being explored.

Respecting the trusting relationship that the project manager had developed with the Chief Executive, and being honest was critical. On learning of the mistake, the Chief Executive was concerned but grateful to hear early and have a chance to inform senior partners directly. The mistake did cause a delay to the project but it strengthened the relationship as the chief executive saw that the mistake was not a usual event and knew he could trust the project manager.

## Conclusion

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This report has set out an overview of **relational project management**.

Relational project management is about establishing and embedding a culture across projects that provide the conditions to get the best out of people. Relational project managers actively work to create a culture where colleagues work with each other.

This doesn't replace established approaches such as PRINCE2 – rather, it is designed to work with them. It differs from other styles of project management in the way it brings human relationships to the fore. Good relational project management still relies on many of the same best practice principles that will be familiar to anyone that has practiced project management.

Ultimately, projects are about people. Relational project management recognises that successful outcomes rely on respectful, healthy relationships, and a belief in resolving difficulties. Where teams work together and relationships are good is where you get the best result.



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#### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Agata Miśkowiec for her creative support, to Steve Walker for his review and suggestions, and to colleagues in Leeds Relational Practice Centre whose work inspired the 'relational' in the title of this report.

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