

# **Behaviors that Lead to Exceptional Performance**

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### **Abstract**

Success does not just happen—it is made to happen. Success is born of behaviors and choices that lead to exceptional performance. Neal Whitten reveals 15 leading-edge, best-practice, results-oriented behaviors that will promote your professional and personal success. Some of these behaviors—intentionally or not—are often avoided. As you strive to achieve your dreams, these behaviors can lay the foundation for your journey. Be prepared to rethink what constitutes effective behavior.

### **Introduction**

I want to talk about *you*... Success does not just happen—it is made to happen. Success is born of behaviors and choices that lead to exceptional performance. There are many behaviors that you can embrace that will help you to be the best. In this paper, I will reveal 15 of the most important leading-edge, best-practice, results-oriented behaviors that will promote your professional and personal success. Many of these behaviors you already know but you may not routinely practice. Some of these behaviors—intentionally or not—are often avoided. As you strive to achieve your dreams, these behaviors can lay the foundation for your journey. Be prepared to rethink what constitutes effective behavior.

This paper is largely derived from two of my best-selling PM books, *Neal Whitten's No-Nonsense Advice for Successful Projects* and *Neal Whitten's Let's Talk! More No-Nonsense Project Advice—Over 700 Q&As!* This paper supports my presentation at the PMI Global Congress 2013 - North America where I will reveal real-life stories that support these behaviors.

### **Behaviors**

- 1. Understand and practice empowerment.** Empowerment, to me, is understanding your job, taking ownership of it and doing whatever is necessary—within legal and ethical parameters—to accomplish it.

It is my experience that most people do not understand their job. If they did, they would be more effective in accomplishing that job. If you are not sure of your job, I suggest you not ask your boss. Instead, take one sheet of paper and write on it in high-level bullets what you view your job to be. Then take that sheet and use it as a basis for discussion with your boss. Although your boss should have already clarified your job to you, the initiative you take in creating these talking points and engaging in discussion will not only help you to understand what constitutes superior performance, your boss will respect your initiative in driving the discussion.

Taking ownership of your job can be demonstrated by coming to work each day with the mindset that you own the company and it is defined by your domain of responsibility. If you take on your job each day as a business owner with the attitude that if you are not successful then you cannot put food in your belly or pay for the roof over your head, then success takes on a very real and vivid necessity.

Doing whatever is necessary to accomplish your job—providing it is legal and ethical—can add a new dimension to your performance. This thinking will help you look for resourceful ways to solve problems rather than searching for excuses why they are too difficult to solve.

- 2. Think for yourself.** For example, challenge tradition, authority and the status quo in a professional and mature manner. Routinely question your own behaviors and actions.

Most people do not think for themselves; they blindly follow charismatic showpersons—be they talk-show hosts, celebrities or anyone else in a talking-head position. They allow themselves to often be mindlessly led. Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from working on projects and within organizations (and from just living life) is to think for yourself. Otherwise you become enslaved by the past and its outdated and ineffective ideas. You are a willing victim of indifference, mediocrity, narrow-mindedness, and unimaginative thinking.

Then you are stuck inside the proverbial box, doomed to repeat past mistakes. Eventually, you and those you lead can become grossly ineffective.

**3. Embrace integrity in all that you do.** Listen to your inner voice and treat it as the wise and trusted friend it is.

Integrity is not an option. More than ever, the business world needs leaders who routinely practice integrity. Simply put, *integrity* is knowing the difference between right and wrong and choosing the right action. As a leader, your integrity is indicative of your character. Use it to build your success and the success of those you lead. If you find yourself unable to decide what the right thing to do in a particular situation is, sometimes it can help to discuss the issue with a trusted third party to ensure that you are not too close to the issue and can see it for what it really is.

A simple rule: Don't ever succumb to illegal or unethical behavior. Never! Why do I bring this up? Because most of you will encounter illegal or unethical behavior at least a half-dozen times in your career. It may not be common but it's not uncommon. Remain vigilant.

**4. Manage daily to your top three priorities.** They define your value and contributions and, ultimately, your career.

If I were to put you on the spot and ask you to state your top three priorities that you currently have going on with your project, and if you could not rattle them off in three snaps of the fingers, you are not a consistently effective leader. You might say, "How dare you judge me with so little information. I believe I am a good leader. Give me a few moments to think about my top three priorities and I will identify them." But if you can't immediately identify them then it tells me that you do not manage to your top three priorities each day. Instead you are managed by interruptions, noise and minutia that come your way throughout the day.

You should start your day with a to-do list that identifies your top three priorities, successfully resolve each of the top three priorities within a few days, replace them with new priorities—then repeat. The presentation supporting this paper will walk you through an effective approach to doing this. The number-one reason for project failure is that the project manager did not manage to his/her top three priorities on a daily basis.

**5. Never avoid necessary confrontation.** Always give problems the sense of urgency and importance they deserve.

A key difference between a highly effective leader and a wanna-be can be summed up with one word: *Conflict*. It's how you deal with conflict. Let's look at an example. Let's say that I am a highly effective PM. An ineffective PM and I will have similar project-related problems to deal with: availability of staffing, having members with the right skills, technology issues, sufficient funding, poor estimates, project-scope creep, working with difficult clients or management, conflicting priorities, uncooperative project members, and so on. My experience—no matter how extensive—does not mean that I am immune to these common problems.

The key difference between my behavior and that of an ineffective PM's behavior is that I will likely confront problems more quickly, with the sense of urgency and importance that they deserve, while the less-effective PM may tend to avoid conflict, causing many of these problems to drift. I will go after problems before they have a chance to morph into more serious issues. I will *never* avoid necessary confrontation and will practice the philosophy that problems do not go away unless I take appropriate action to mitigate them. Less-effective PMs tend to be too soft and less sure of themselves and the appropriate action to take. The avoidance of necessary conflict is a hallmark of the less effective.

**6. Don't make it personal or take it personally.** It's all about what's best for the business.

Most of us sometimes wrestle with this issue. It can help to look at your job as strictly business—not personal. At work, the objective is to have a successful business outcome. It's not about you. It's not about winning or losing. It's about achieving business success. You should care about success. You should work with passion and take ownership of everything that can affect your domain of responsibility. But in the end, when the dust has settled, it's all about what's best for the business.

Some people have a tendency to make things personal, and some to take things personally. Doing so is a sign of professional immaturity; professional immaturity harms successful business outcomes. Resist allowing others to draw you into a personal conflict versus a business conflict. Do things because they are the right business things to do, not because you or someone else takes things personally.

7. **Routinely practice boldness and courage to be a consistently effective leader.** Your behavior drives your success.

By boldness, I mean the act of responding to a situation in a manner that may be viewed as daring to some, but is essential to address the issue at hand. I do not mean being rude, reckless, insensitive, or arrogant. I mean doing whatever is necessary to achieve the objective (provided, of course, that it is legal and ethical).

By courage, I mean the act of confronting a fear—something that we may be afraid of. The number-one reason why leaders fail is that they are too soft; they have weak backbones. (The number-one reason why projects fail is because the project manager is too soft to manage to the top three priorities on a daily basis; see item #4.) They lack the courage to be as effective as they should be and need to be. It's not easy standing up to those around you, be they executives, clients, vendors, contractors, peers, or team members. But if you expect to be consistently successful as a leader, you must demonstrate the courage to lead yourself and your team to success. It's not about effort or lofty intentions, it's about results.

8. **Do not allow what others think about you to be more important than what you think about yourself.** Listen for helpful snippets but remain in control of you.

At some time or another, you will find people who disapprove of your behavior or your decisions. (You might even project those feelings toward others from time to time.) Even the people you love, and who love you, will at times disapprove of your actions. Keep in mind that other people's opinions are just that—opinions. If you allow what other people say about you to immobilize you—to impact your thoughts or performance negatively—then you are saying, in effect, that what other people think about you is more important than what you think about yourself.

9. **Don't dwell on yesterday.** Admit mistakes, learn from them, apply those lessons going forward... and move on.

Some of my clients, when I am at their campus, will ask me to stay an extra day and will give me an office for that day. Outside the office, there is a calendar and folks can sign up to be mentored in blocks of 30 minutes. This one gentleman—I will call him Jason—was having a problem with his project and brought his project plan. He signed on for two consecutive blocks of 30 minutes each. About 20 minutes into the session there was a knock on the door. It opened and a person told Jason, "You are wanted on a conference call right now. And by the way, both our VP and the client's VP are on the line... as well as several other senior managers."

The person left and closed the door. Jason rose from his chair and moved towards the door. I asked him where he was going. He said, "You heard. I am wanted on a conference call." I said to Jason to come back, sit down and relax a moment. They probably don't even know that you have been found. I asked him if he thought he knew what the conference call problem was about. He said yes; that he had messed up and told me what the issue was. I said that he was right: he did mess up. But who doesn't from time to time. I suggested he go into the call and do four things. (1) Admit you made a mistake. This will immediately diffuse the situation. It's no fun for folks to kick you when you are down. (2) State what you are going to do to fix the problem before someone directs you to do so or tells you how to do so. This is called being accountable. (3) State what you are going to do so that this problem does not happen again. This is called being professional. And (4)... Let it go! Learn from the experience but do not be defined by it. Let it go. I found out that afternoon Jason had taken my advice and implemented all four suggestions. I was quite proud of him.

Present moments are all we have. The past does not exist, nor does the future. If you try and live in either then it will cause you to reduce your concentration and effectiveness in your present moments. Learn from the past, plan for the future, but live fully in the now.

10. **Mind your own business first.** Behave as if you own the business and your business is defined by your domain of responsibility.

You are a business person first and a PM second. It's all about business. When you start your work each day, do *not* focus on moving your company forward. If possible, do not focus on your company at all. Yes, you read correctly. Instead, channel your energies toward successfully completing your assignments—*your domain of responsibility*. If everyone in your company focused first on his or her domain of responsibility, the company would do just fine. In fact, your company would probably be more successful than it is today.

Your domain of responsibility includes all responsibilities and commitments that fall within the scope of your assignment. In short, it is the area for which you are accountable. Focusing on your domain of responsibility doesn't mean that you don't care about your company. Your actions demonstrate the opposite. The success of your assignments strengthens the success of your company. Focus on you and your team members being accountable for your respective domains of responsibility and the rest will follow.

- 11. Check your ego at the door.** It's never about you. It's about the project, the sponsor, the client, the team, the company, making your boss look good (oh yes, your read correctly; your job includes making your boss look good) and other objectives.

It's not about you; never was. Do not bring your ego to work... ever. Check it at the doorstep before entering. If you bring your ego to work it will only trip you up. It will cause you to focus more on the *who* than on the *what*. It's all about business. It's not personal. Don't make it personal or take it personally. You will see your effectiveness and reputation grow if you keep your ego at bay.

- 12. Trust but verify.** Strive to build trust among project stakeholders, but insist on metrics, checks and balances and other tools to ensure outcomes are being met.

In most cases it is not okay to trust that others will do as they say. Most people working on projects will not intentionally lie, but most of us are eternal optimists. We mean well, but when faced with a problem we can paint ourselves into a corner and inadvertently cause problems for others. If you have a dependency on someone for something, it is up to *you* to ensure that you have an appropriate plan for tracking the progress of the dependency.

- 13. Treat others as you would like to be treated.** You will be remembered and revered for how you made others feel.

We are not objects, commodities or machines. We seek and require to be treated with respect, dignity and nurturing. Nor are we low maintenance. We have great aspirations and, therefore, high needs. In fact, we are high maintenance whether we like it or not, or admit it or not. When you get past the surface—the veneer that so many of us spend a lifetime developing, molding, shaping, and refining—we are all remarkably similar. We all want the same things from life: We want to be loved and appreciated; we want security and health; we want to contribute, to achieve; we want to dream and pursue those dreams to their imagined end.

The core principle underlying effective interpersonal communications is the Golden Rule: “Treat others as you would like to be treated.” There is no better rule to follow when working with or serving others such as project stakeholders.

- 14. Think like a leader.** It's not about the ability of those around you to lead; it's about your ability to lead regardless of what is happening around you.

Do you know your company's most cherished asset? Here are some common answers to what companies value most—all are important, but only the last is correct.

*People?* Many companies mistakenly say so in their core beliefs.

*Profit?* Obviously important to a for-profit company, and sound financials are a sign of effective management even for nonprofits, academic institutions and public sector entities.

*Products and services?* Magnets for clients.

*Clients?* Without them, the company has no future.

*Intellectual property?* Past investments help secure future success.

*Brand?* How will customers know you otherwise?

*Marketing?* The only way to tell customers about your products and services.

*Cash flow?* Solid companies can pay their bills and invest in their future.

*Productivity?* An ever-rising bar.

*Quality?* Of course.

*Creativity and ingenuity?* A company cannot rest on its laurels.

*Integrity?* Getting warmer ...

*Leaders?* BINGO! A company's most cherished asset is its leaders; it's leadership.

If a company has mediocre leaders and the best employees, it will be a mediocre force in its industry. However, a company with the best leaders and mediocre employees will be a formidable force in its industry. Yes, formidable. It's all about leadership. Interestingly, companies with the best leaders don't have mediocre employees. Employees rise to the occasion for their leaders.

**15. Define who you choose to be.** Then muster the courage to walk the thought. You are what you perceive yourself to be; your vision becomes your reality.

You become what you think about all day long. If you think small, so too will be your accomplishments. If you think big... you get the idea. The most successful leaders have learned to believe in their ability to make things happen—to follow their dreams and transform those dreams into reality.

It's almost always true that we are our own greatest obstacle to becoming what we truly want to be. If it is truly important to you, then never, never, never give up. As Henry David Thoreau, American writer, philosopher, and naturalist, said, "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

## **Closing**

I believe that everyone has the capacity to be a consistently successful project manager. Everyone! Although some may be more effective than others, or rise to greater heights, this does not diminish the great opportunities for turning your vision into reality. All the attributes of a successful project manager can be learned and practiced if you choose to do so. Believe you can make a difference... and you will!

*Now, go make a bigger difference!*

## **References**

Whitten, N. (2005). *Neal Whitten's No-Nonsense Advice for Successful Projects*. Vienna, NJ: Management Concepts.

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