

MAKING PROJECT MANAGEMENT INDISPENSABLE FOR BUSINESS RESULTS.®

# P M N E T W O R K

JULY 2007 / VOLUME 21, No. 7

*Small projects might end up in big trouble without the right amount of process.*

> Ford Revs Up a New Project

> Taking a Customized Approach to Maturity

> Alfonso Bucero on Fighting Resistance to Change

built  
to SCALE

embrace, value and utilize project management and attribute their success to it.

# NTS

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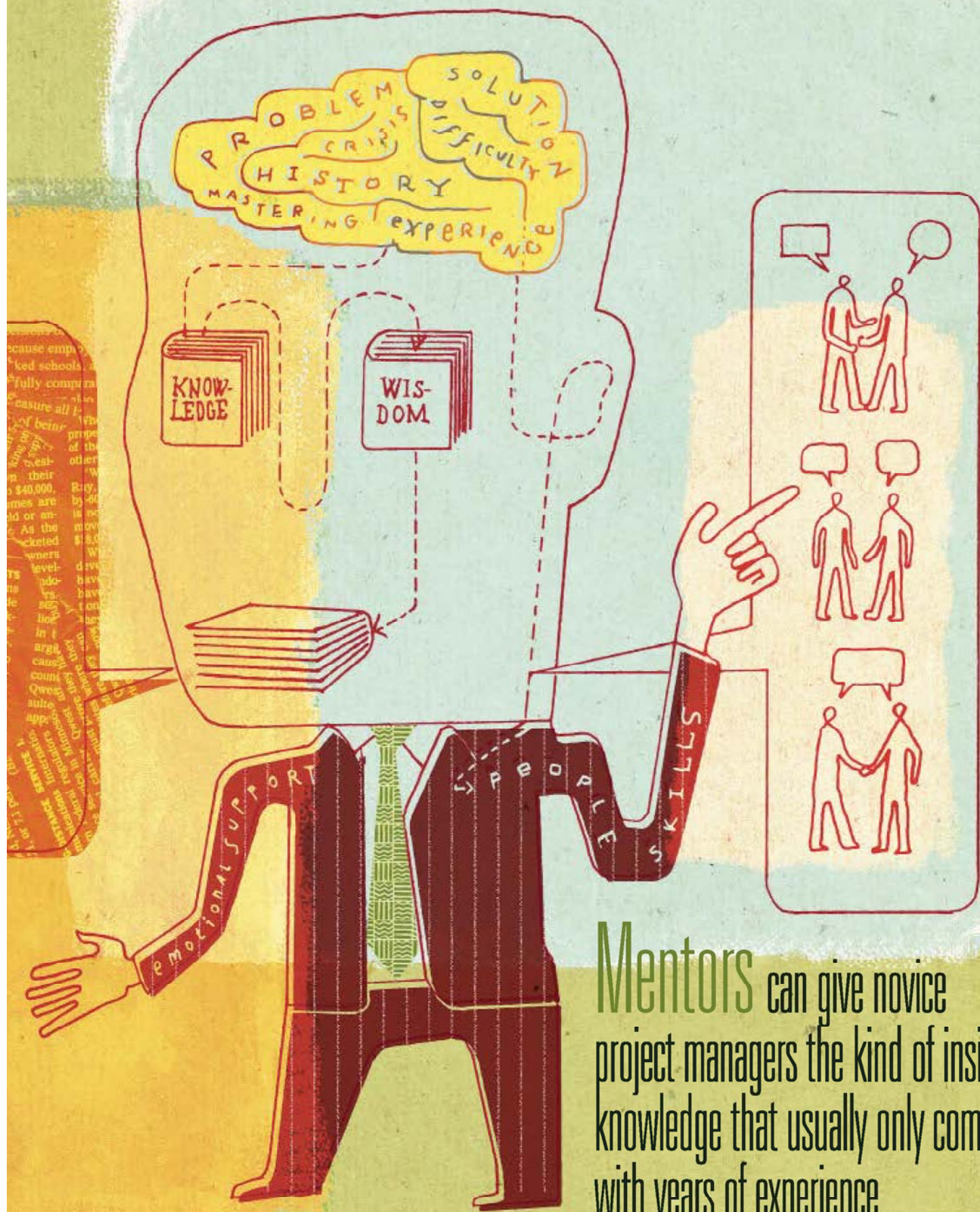
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# trade secrets

by Elisa Ludwig \* illustration by Otto Steininger







**Mentors** can give novice project managers the kind of insider knowledge that usually only comes with years of experience.



Behind almost every accomplished project manager stands a wise and generous adviser who sets an example, helps define goals, lends an ear or simply provides a much-needed dose of reality. Of course, finding that wise and generous adviser is often a project in itself.

Over the course of his 36-year career at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Robert J. Shaw, Ph.D., has managed to develop relationships with several great mentors. Now chief of the New Business and Partnership Office at Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, he says it was through their insights that he recognized the human element of project management. He also learned how to navigate the sometimes murky waters of office dynamics. “You can take the requisite courses

Alexandre Rodrigues, Ph.D., PMP, executive partner at PMO Consulting, Lisbon, Portugal, and founding president of the PMI Portugal Chapter. “It’s very difficult to understand this profession without seeing it happening in the field.”

Dr. Rodrigues says many project managers simply can’t learn skills such as top-down thinking, problem solving and delegating tasks through training alone. Project managers need to see the strategies in action, with a mentor demonstrating their value.

“You can take a three-day class about new processes, but you need someone with more experience to help you put these things into practice,” says Elizabeth Larson, PMP, CEO of Watermark Learning in Minneapolis, Minn., USA.



Project management is between the world of numbers and the world of people’s behavior. It’s very difficult to understand this profession without seeing it happening in the field.

—Alexandre Rodrigues, Ph.D., PMP, PMO Consulting, Lisbon, Portugal

and learn various tools or techniques, but management goes beyond numbers and charts,” Dr. Shaw says. “That’s where mentors come in.”

By its nature, project management demands an intricate balance of skills, and mentors can provide the kind of knowledge that typically only comes after spending years in the trenches.

“Project management is between the world of numbers and the world of people’s behavior,” says

She recalls experiencing some of those challenges herself when she was first starting as a project manager at mega-retailer Target. “We were trained in project management tools, but our heads were spinning as we wondered how we would put it all into practice,” she says. “Several months later, the company brought in an on-site mentor with whom we met once a week and it was a wonderful thing for helping us use our new skills.”

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## GIVE AND TAKE

Senior project managers certainly have much to offer less-experienced up-and-comers—but the mentorship experience is hardly one-sided.

“This is also rewarding and stimulating to the mentors themselves who see an opportunity to influence others and have their expertise and contribution to the organization recognized,” says Alexandre Rodrigues, Ph.D., PMP, PMO Consulting.

Mentors gain an opportunity to take on a leadership role and grow new management skills through the exchange. “Often, the project manager’s boss is not a professional project manager,” he says. “This prevents the ‘leading by example’ approach. Mentors can provide this type of leadership.”

Indeed, serving as a mentor can ultimately boost both parties’ careers. Helping train a fellow team member serves the company as a whole and reflects well on the mentor. It can also help prepare that person to transition to a new position in the company.

“You think it’s the mentee who gets the most benefit out of that relationship, but in order to advance yourself, you need to find someone with potential and groom them to assume your role,” says Robert Quick, PMP, Cisco Systems.

And senior project managers just might pick up a thing or two from those upstarts they’re training. Younger project managers can

provide “a fresh perspective on issues,” he says.

For many senior project managers, the experience of mentoring is a way to acknowledge their gratitude to their own mentors—and that can be reward enough.

“A lot of people invested in me and my career when they didn’t have to,” says Robert J. Shaw, Ph.D., Glenn Research Center, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). “Now I feel as though I can invest in people on the other side of table and hopefully help them, in turn, contribute to NASA. They say you can never really pay it back, but you can pay it forward.”

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Along with bolstering skills and efficiency, mentors can also offer a source of emotional support for project managers just starting out in their careers. “The mentor gives tranquility, safety, and in some cases, becomes a very good friend of project managers,” says Vilca Damiani, an independent project management consultant in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

### Meet Your Mentor

Given the benefits, many organizations aren’t leaving mentoring to chance. In the United States, the state of New York has its own formal project management mentoring program. “In New York, we have over 60 agencies in addition to multiple authorities, offices and boards, and as more projects became multiorganizational, we knew we needed to set a standard approach,” says Brenda Breslin, PMP, director of the New York State

Office of Technology’s project management office. “With mentoring, we can leverage work that’s already been done rather than reinvent the wheel.”

Program participants are typically project managers with some experience who have been nominated by their respective agencies. Over the course of six months, they participate in 15 days of classroom training and five days of structured practicums. These sessions feature a variety of expert speakers as well as provide a safe environment in which to practice newly learned techniques, Ms. Breslin says. Each participant is paired with a mentor to work on an agency project and can also observe the mentor at work or be observed by the mentor.

Many program graduates have gone on to become CIOs or take on other top agency positions—and then become mentors themselves.

Last winter, project manager Robert Quick, PMP, participated in an in-house mentoring program at

## GLOBAL

Like everything else in the global economy, mentoring is increasingly crossing cultures. Alexandre Rodrigues, Ph.D., PMP, PMO Consulting, has mentored project managers from Australia, Mozambique, the United Kingdom and at the international headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Brussels, Belgium.

Although global mentoring relationships undoubtedly have their benefits, it can be quite easy to send the wrong signals when dealing with someone from another culture. Dr. Rodrigues recommends mentors make an effort to learn and recognize differences in attitudes toward uncertainty, time, emotions and even

humor in working relationships. For example, in areas that aren't as driven by the clock, project managers may need to be trained to build extra time into the schedule.

Perceptions of power can also vary around the world, Dr. Rodrigues says. "In some cultures, the way advice is delivered can be mistaken as exerting power over the other," he says. "The person being mentored can either perceive the mentor as being directive or as being too soft and unsure. In some cultures, if you say, 'Perhaps you can try this,' it can be interpreted as the mentor not really knowing. They may expect you to say, 'This is how it works.'"

Cisco Systems, Research Triangle Park, N.C., USA. Within the first two months, his mentor helped him prepare for his Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification—which he obtained. They also discussed his career goals, which made Mr. Quick realize he was interested in moving toward a position with more customer interaction. Mr. Quick says the program was invaluable in giving him insight that he otherwise would not have had with only two years of experience.

### Help Wanted

Not every company is so enlightened, and sometimes project managers are left to their own devices. "There is the perception that mentoring is an *ad hoc* and 'volunteering' type of activity, therefore low-priority," Dr. Rodrigues says.

Project managers in organizations without formal programs should form interest groups to share knowledge, experience and lessons learned, he says. Informal mentor relationships can often grow out of this arrangement.

Professional organizations are another source for project managers to network their way to a mentor. Some,

including PMI's Atlanta Chapter, Atlanta, Ga., USA, offer programs matching up participants with mentors.

Dr. Shaw believes he was simply fortunate to be in the right place at the right time. Today, NASA has a formal mentoring program in place and he finds himself on the other side of the relationship, as the sage mentor offering advice. "It's not just telling someone to do something. It's telling them why you did it and exposing them to a repository of knowledge," Dr. Shaw says. "I've found that history has a way of repeating itself. Now I can share things that happened years ago and help others prepare for when the same problems happen on their watch."

But he has also found the mentee must be receptive to a potential adviser. "There has to be a willingness to accept mentoring. Oftentimes, you see young people who feel they really know more than perhaps they do," Dr. Shaw says. "If someone wants to mentor you and you shut them down, they might move on." **PM**

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*Elisa Ludwig is a Philadelphia, Pa., USA-based freelance writer who has written about technology, management and the pharmaceutical industry.*