



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03SJ5  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
JULY 27, 2017

## **ARTICLE** **PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

# The 4 Types of Project Manager

*by Carsten Lund Pedersen and Thomas Ritter*



The employee types and the growth opportunities that they are best at pursuing can be positioned along two dimensions: (1) Is the growth opportunity in line with our existing strategy? (2) Can a reliable business case be made? These two questions create a matrix that distinguishes the four different kinds of project leaders, each of which is optimally suited for a different type of project.

## 4 Types of Project Managers



**SOURCE** CARSTEN PEDERSEN  
AND THOMAS RITTER

© HBR.ORG

Will every organization need all four types of employees to sustainably develop and grow their organizations? We argue that even the most stable and conservative industries may be threatened by

disruption — and the most dynamic and hypercompetitive industries also entail incremental growth opportunities that can be quantified and realistically assessed. Consequently, there is often a job for all four types of employees in most organizations, although the optimal dose of each can differ. At the very least, executives need to be aware of the variety of growth opportunities that they may be losing out on by leaning heavily on a single type of project manager.

### The Four Types

The four types pursue different growth opportunities and follow different communicative logics to gain support within the organization (see the table below). In other words, you need them all because they see and support different types of growth opportunities. In that respect, they complement each other. This does not necessarily mean that you need an equal number of each, as most organizations must predominantly rely on *executors* to ensure the alignment and feasibility needed to maintain profits in the short term. However, you will need a few *prophets*, *gamblers*, and *experts* to be able to identify and pursue growth opportunities at the periphery that can help you renew your organization beyond the chosen path. In the following, we further explain the characteristics of each of the different types.

### Which Type of Project Manager Is Right for Which Project?

	PROPHET	GAMBLER	EXPERT	EXECUTOR
Strategy should be...	Challenged	Followed	Challenged	Followed
The growth opportunity is...	A grand vision	A bet	An analysis	A sure thing
Organizational followers should...	Make a leap of faith	Gamble a bit and pursue rewards	Listen to the advice and act upon it	Stay within the strategy and follow the analyses
Weapon of choice	Persuasive vision	Potential reward	Well-supported arguments	Business cases and reports

SOURCE CARSTEN PEDERSEN AND THOMAS RITTER

© HBR.ORG

**Prophet.** This type of project manager actively pursues business opportunities that lie outside the existing strategic boundaries in an area where it is extremely difficult to obtain trustworthy data concerning the likelihood of success. Hence, the prophet seeks to gain organizational followers for a grand vision of a growth opportunity that is strategically different from the status quo — and without trustworthy quantitative evidence, consequently relying on organizational members making a leap of faith in support of the vision. Obviously, running such projects is risky, as it is likely that the growth opportunities will not materialize, and therefore that the employee may be a “false prophet.” Be that as it may, a prophet is needed to challenge the existing strategy and to pursue overlooked growth opportunities.

A constructive use of this employee type is found at Google, which has a unit called X (formerly Google X), which is a self-proclaimed [moonshot factory](#). Employees in this unit seek to solve big

problems using breakthrough technologies and radical solutions. Hence, the projects in X tend to be outside Google's current domain and strategic focus. In such projects, it is typically impossible to realistically assess the likelihood of success before they are tried out.

**Gambler.** This type of project manager actively pursues business opportunities that lie within the existing strategic boundaries but have no good business case attached, as trustworthy data concerning the likelihood of success is lacking. Hence, the gambler seeks to gain organizational followers for a big bet on a growth opportunity that is consistent with the current strategy but without trustworthy quantitative evidence. In other words, gamblers play by the rules of the game as they pursue growth opportunities within the existing strategy, but they cannot predict the likelihood of success. Consequently, the gambler seeks to engage other organizational members who also like bets. This can obviously be viewed as an uncertain path, as there is some likelihood that the growth opportunities are not feasible and that they may therefore result in significant losses. However, gamblers are necessary, as they can update the existing strategy by pursuing analytically overlooked growth opportunities.

This type of project champion is documented in [a study by Paddy Miller and Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg](#), which shows that MTV's first digitally integrated and interactive program, *Top Selection*, was initially tried under the radar before the project's backers had sufficient proof of concept to get managerial approval to continue. This project was driven by gamblers, as they stayed inside the existing strategic boundaries but were unable to document the likelihood of success before the idea had been tested.

**Expert.** This type of project manager actively pursues business opportunities that lie outside the existing strategic boundaries but for which trustworthy data builds a solid business case. Hence, experts wish to gain organizational followers for a change in action in favor of a growth opportunity that is inconsistent with the current strategy but is supported by solid, trustworthy quantitative evidence. Consequently, experts rely on organizational members actually listening to their advice. Although the growth opportunities are well supported and should therefore be feasible, the main challenge is to make organizational members aware of the need for strategic change and of the urgent need to act in this regard. The expert is needed to challenge the existing strategy by pursuing well-supported growth opportunities that lie outside the organization's current strategy.

Experts in action are seen in the well-known story of Intel's transition from memory chips to microprocessors, where key employees within the organization tried to persuade Intel's management of the value of the opportunity for some time. It took the executive team [several years of internal soul-searching](#) before they were ready to make the organizational transition. In this case, the growth opportunity was outside the existing strategy, but it was possible to document the commercial potential and the likelihood of success with some certainty.

**Executor.** This project manager actively pursues business opportunities that lie within the existing strategic boundaries and have great cases. The executor gains organizational followers for a sure-

thing growth opportunity that is consistent with the current strategy and is backed by trustworthy quantitative evidence. In other words, there is no risk, no uncertainty, and no challenge — just a need for execution. Consequently, executors rely on organizational members to follow their rigorous analyses of a strategically embraced project. This can be viewed as the most certain path to success, as the growth opportunity is well documented and aligned with the existing strategy. However, the executor can only point to a limited number of growth opportunities that are low-hanging fruit — the executor cannot provide insights into the more radical and unknown business opportunities. Many who bear the formal title of business developer systematically [analyze, prepare, and support growth opportunities](#) that lie within the strategic boundaries and for which it is possible to realistically assess the likelihood of success.

For instance, DuPont has a systematic approach for assessing and implementing growth opportunities. It [entails](#) a phased and systematic handling of new opportunities within a disciplined framework built on best practices, providing standardized guidance throughout the process from initial concept to subsequent commercialization. A [comprehensive business case is essential](#) to initiate the process — and as the approach involves key work streams and “blocks of work” that the core team must plan and execute in an effective manner, it is particularly suitable for executors.

### **How Do They Interact?**

The various types of project managers may struggle in their interactions with each other. For instance, a prophet may see an executor as overly bureaucratic and rigid, while an executor may view a prophet as unrealistic and disorganized. Consequently, conflict tends to loom among the different types.

What typically happens is that the [logic of one of the types becomes dominant](#) throughout the organization. The fact that a single logic pervades the organization at the expense of the others may mean that key employees of a different type leave the organization and [take their ideas with them](#). Moreover, relying on a single type of logic may lead to organizational inertia, which is dangerous in dynamic and evolving markets. You need to ensure enough room for all of the logics within the organization, ideally by introducing [boundary-spanning individuals](#) who can navigate among these logics. In this regard, it is beneficial if top management adopts a “bridging” role to allow for coexistence and diversity.

As an executive, you can similarly seek to stimulate a fruitful understanding and interaction among the different types of employees. For instance, having identified the different types within your organization, you can set up a workshop where one type meets and discusses with their alter ego (that is, executors talk to prophets, and gamblers talk to experts). This interaction can help clarify differences in opinions, routines and values — which may help create a greater mutual understanding and respect among the different employee types.

## Do Executives Contribute to the Problem?

Executives partly contribute to unsuccessful projects and unrealized growth opportunities when they don't think through who should be assigned to which projects. Prophets, gamblers, experts, and executors each have their own strengths and weaknesses that are optimally suited to fit certain project types. Therefore, no type is inherently better or rarer than the others.

Executives contribute to organizational failure when they misalign projects and project managers, but this fact is often hidden in the ruins of a failed project. There may be a tendency to see prophets and gamblers featuring on prominent magazine covers or taking newspaper headlines if they succeed with their high-profile projects. For this reason, executives tend to assume that prophets and gamblers are the best. In such cases, executives may be likely to promote good executors to run a prophet-type project, as senior management may think that the executor is finally ready for this big opportunity (with potentially disastrous results). Or executives may assume that they should tap prophets to run a project that really needs a great executor — which may lead to managerial befuddlement when the prophet doesn't succeed. Instead of assuming that certain types are better than others, executives need to be aware of, value, and give appropriate room to all four types — and match them with the right projects.

The bottom line is that the diversity of styles offers a [competitive advantage in terms of business development](#), and all four types are necessary pieces of your organizational constellation, even though the optimal dose of each may differ. As an executive, it is crucial that you:

- Make sure you have each type within your organization
- Make room for each type to work in their own manner
- Make sense of their respective ideas, by following their respective logics
- Make time for matching projects and project managers correctly

Meeting the various types where they are, and paying attention to their diverse ways of thinking, will help you obtain the needed diversity among your employees to develop your business. Moreover, this resonates with comprehensive [findings](#) that emphasize that the hallmark of great managers is that they [discover and capitalize on the unique strengths of individual employees](#).

Growth and business development are top priorities in most C-suites across the globe, but too few executives focus on maintaining a wide range of people to ensure the identification of novel opportunities. Therefore, executives who want to develop their businesses need to first develop the right amount of staff diversity to drive a diverse portfolio of growth opportunities. Only when diverse people are on board can an organization drive commercially sustainable growth.

---

**Carsten Lund Pedersen** is an assistant professor at the Department of Marketing at Copenhagen Business School in Denmark, where he researches B2B digitization strategies, employee autonomy, and market strategies in times of change.

---

---

**Thomas Ritter** is a professor of market strategy and business development at the Department of Strategy and Innovation at Copenhagen Business School in Denmark, where he researches business model innovation, market strategies, and market management.

---