

The Coaching PM:

How to Lead Projects Through People

A Field Guide for Project Managers Who Want to Coach, Not Just Manage

Z • ZONE OF GENIUS

E • ENERGIZE CONNECTIONS

S • SPARK INNOVATION

T • THRIVE TOGETHER

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WELCOME

A Note from Nicki

Congratulations on being the kind of project manager who leans in. The fact that you picked up this guide tells me you already sense something the best PMs have figured out: **technical skill gets you the job — people skill makes you exceptional.**

For over a decade, I've worked at the intersection of project management and leadership coaching. I'm a PMP and Maxwell Leadership Certified coach, and I've spent years watching talented project managers hit a ceiling — not because their plans were wrong, but because their conversations were.

This workbook is your starting point. In the next few pages, you'll discover the five coaching moves that transform how you show up on every project, plus a self-assessment and action planning tool built around my **ZEST Framework**.

*"The best project managers don't just manage tasks.
They develop people."*

Take 20 minutes with this guide. Be honest with yourself. Then let's talk about what comes next.

Lead with Zest,

Nicki Baxter, PMP

Maxwell Leadership Certified | Founder, Zesty Leadership LLC

THE CHALLENGE

Why Good PMs Get Stuck

Most project management training focuses on the *what* — scope, schedule, budget, risk. These are essential. But they're only half the job.

The other half? The humans. Stakeholders with competing priorities. Team members who disengage. Sponsors who lose confidence. These are **people problems** — and no Gantt chart fixes them.

70% of projects fail due to people & communication issues, not technology	58% of PMs say stakeholder management is their biggest challenge	#1 skill gap cited by project sponsors: leadership presence
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The solution isn't to become a therapist. It's to add a coaching mindset to your existing PM toolkit — to ask better questions, build deeper trust, and unlock the potential already sitting in your team.

The Coaching PM Difference

A managing PM assigns tasks and tracks completion.

A coaching PM develops people while delivering outcomes.

Both matter. The coaching PM does both.

THE TOOLKIT

5 Coaching Moves Every PM Needs

01 · Ask, Don't Tell

Replace *"Here's what we need to do"* with *"What do you think the best path forward is?"* Coaching starts with curiosity. When you ask instead of tell, you build ownership, surface hidden insights, and develop your team's thinking capacity.

02 · Listen at Level 2

Most of us listen to respond. Level 2 listening means listening to understand — picking up on emotion, energy, and what's left unsaid. In a status meeting, this is the difference between hearing "we're on track" and sensing "we're struggling but afraid to say it."

03 · Name the Gap, Not the Blame

When performance falls short, coaching PMs address the gap between current and desired behavior — without judgment. Try: *"I noticed X. I expected Y. Help me understand what happened."* This creates accountability without defensiveness.

04 · Champion Strengths Strategically

Your team members have a Zone of Genius — the intersection of what they're uniquely talented at and what energizes them. Coaching PMs identify these zones and align assignments accordingly. People deliver more when their work feels meaningful.

05 · Hold the Vision, Release the How

Define the outcome clearly. Then let your team own the approach. Micromanagement signals distrust. Coaching PMs set clear destination points and trust their people to find the best route — stepping in only when truly needed.

YOUR FRAMEWORK

The ZEST Framework in Action

Here's how each ZEST pillar translates directly to your work as a project manager:

Z
ZONE OF
GENIUS

Know your team's strengths at a granular level. Assign work that aligns with people's natural talents — not just availability. Run a team strength-mapping session at project kickoff and revisit quarterly.

E
ENERGIZE
CONNECTIONS

Relationships are your project's invisible infrastructure. Invest intentionally in stakeholder trust before you need it. One 15-minute coffee conversation early in a project prevents three crisis calls later.

S
SPARK
INNOVATION

When your team hits a wall, your job is to open possibility, not prescribe solutions. Ask expansive questions: "What would we do if resources weren't a constraint?" Coaching unlocks creative problem-solving.

T
THRIVE
TOGETHER

Sustainable project performance requires psychological safety, shared accountability, and celebration of progress. Build team cultures where people speak up early, own outcomes, and grow through challenges.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Coaching PM Diagnostic

Rate yourself honestly on each statement.

1 = Rarely 2 = Sometimes 3 = Often 4 = Usually 5 = Consistently

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Zone of Genius					
I know each team member's unique strengths beyond their job title.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I assign work based on individual strengths, not just capacity.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have conversations with my team about what energizes them.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Energize Connections					
I invest time in stakeholder relationships before crises occur.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I adapt my communication style to each person's preferences.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My stakeholders trust me enough to tell me bad news early.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spark Innovation					
When my team is stuck, I ask questions before offering solutions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I create psychological safety so team members speak up freely.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I facilitate problem-solving rather than defaulting to directing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Thrive Together					
My team feels accountable to each other, not just to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I celebrate progress and small wins, not just final delivery.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My team learns and grows stronger through project challenges.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Add up your scores per section (max 15 each). Your lowest score reveals your biggest coaching growth opportunity.

YOUR ACTION PLAN

30 Days to Your Coaching PM Practice

Pick ONE area from your diagnostic where you scored lowest. Use this page to design a focused 30-day experiment.

My focus area (ZEST pillar):

Current State: What's happening now that I want to change?

Be specific — describe a real situation or pattern.

Desired State: What will be different in 30 days?

What will you see, hear, or feel when this is working?

My 3 Coaching Experiments (specific actions I will try this month):

Experiment 1:

Experiment 2:

Experiment 3:

How will I know it's working? My success indicator:

Think: What feedback will I receive? What will change in team dynamics?

Accountability Partner

Share this page with a trusted colleague, your manager, or a coach. Schedule a 20-minute check-in at the 30-day mark. Coaching works best when someone is holding the mirror for you.

LET'S KEEP GOING

Ready to Go Deeper?

If today's session sparked something for you, here's how we can continue the work together:

Free 30-Min Strategy Call

Let's talk about where you are and where you want to go as a coaching leader. No pitch — just a real conversation.

1:1 Leadership Coaching

A structured coaching engagement for PMs and project leaders ready to level up their people skills and leadership presence.

Zesty Leadership Workshops

Bring the ZEST Framework to your team or organization. Half-day, full-day, and virtual formats available.

Digital Resources on Etsy

Download worksheets, planners, and coaching toolkits from the Zesty Leadership Etsy shop.

Connect with Nicki

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Lead with Zest; Inspire the Rest