

Synopsis of *Learning from the Formidable: Building Information Technology Project Manager Competence through Experience*, a dissertation by Robert P.M. Demare presented to the faculties at the University of Pennsylvania in 2014.

The study focused on the competency development of information technology managers and addressed three research questions:

1. What kinds of on-the-job experiences are perceived by IT project managers as the most critical for accelerating project manager competence?
2. As a result of insights gained through these critical on-the-job experiences, what changes in practices do IT project managers report making?
3. How do other people support IT project managers as they experience career events perceived to be development?

Interviews were conducted with 19 global IT project managers. Prior to the interview, they were asked to reflect on events or episodes over their career that led to a lasting change in the way they managed projects. During the interview, they described these events: What happened? What changed about the way you manage projects following this event? What helped you during the event? The interviews yielded rich descriptions of 64 career experiences.

An iterative coding process was used to identify themes in the qualitative data. An initial coding scheme relied heavily on coding categories used in previous *Lessons of Experience* studies conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership. However, coding categories were modified and augmented as necessary to gain a thorough and meaningful interpretation of the data.

Results related to the three research questions are provided in tables below.

Reported Developmental Experiences

Theme	Count	% of Total Incidents with Theme
Stretching Boundaries of Capability	36	56%
Unfamiliar Responsibilities	25	39%
Significant Increase in Scope	19	30%
Proving Yourself	15	23%
Adverse Situations	29	45%
Failure or Major Setback	18	28%
Negative Relationships	10	16%
Extreme Overload	6	9%
High Stakes	28	44%
Pressure	25	39%
Turnaround Situation	9	14%
Observing Effective Practices	9	14%
Directly Managing People	7	11%
Formal Learning and Development	10	16%
Non-Work Developmental Experiences	3	5%

Reported Behavioral Changes

Theme	Count	% of Total Incidents with Theme
Managing the work	54	84%
Maximizing team contribution	25	39%
Solid PM Practices	16	25%
Spend time learning about the project	8	13%
Managing Relationships	25	39%
Communication and Stakeholders	24	38%
Reputation importance	9	14%
Managing the Vision	24	38%
Finding a Way Forward	15	23%
Leading with 'Backbone'	14	22%

Reported Developmental Relationships*

Theme	Count	% of Total Incidents with Theme Present
Developmental Relationships	41	64%
Supportive 'Other' People	32	50%
Direct Manager	14	22%

*Support from other people and direct managers came in several forms: they provided direct advice from expertise gained through years of experience; they served as sounding boards for testing ideas or “bouncing off” difficult situations; and they stood behind or “backed” the project manager when he or she was in difficult situations.