

Awe and the Project Manager

A White Paper

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*Take a walk in a forest on Sunday and be a better
project manager on Monday*

Abstract

Projects can suffer significant losses even when governance, management processes and technical capabilities appear adequate. Poor interpersonal management, stakeholder relationships, and self-interested behaviours can add significant risk to projects. PMI's 2023 *Pulse of the Profession* report *Power Skills: Redefining Project Success* ([PMI, 2023](#)) emphasised the importance to project success of abilities and behaviours that facilitate working with others. There are strong arguments for us to shift our mindset from project management-as-engineering to project management-as-behavioural science ([Flyvbjerg-PMJ, 2023](#)).

A new area of behavioural science study that shows significant potential to lift project management performance is the emotion of awe. Awe is the feeling we experience when we are in the presence of something vast and mysterious that transcends our understanding of the world. It is known as “the new science” ([Allen, 2018](#)), having been studied scientifically for less than 30 years. Awe, whether the everyday-awe of watching a bug on a leaf, or the more intense awe of watching the sun set from a mountain top, has been found to decrease ego, increase interpersonal connection, increase pro-sociality (collaboration), decrease stress, create more rigorous thinking, and increase our sense of meaning. These effects can directly benefit project management in the key areas of interpersonal management, the management of stakeholders, servancy (leadership and followership), and the mitigation of social pain.

Awe works at a deeper level of personal change than the lists of ‘expected behaviours’ used in mechanistic behaviour-change frameworks. This paper reviews these effects and recommends sources of awe that project managers might pursue to improve the performance of their projects.

Introduction

In spite of advances in the management of projects, project governance, project management tools, and training, projects continue to fail at very high rates. The problem of project management failure is increasingly seen as not one of processes but one of people.

We begin by exploring the deeper problem of soft-skills failure in project management, and the need for project managers to focus on relationship building, collaborative leadership, the building of trust in stakeholders, and the prioritising of stakeholder needs.

We then describes the emotion of awe, the ‘new science’, what causes it, and the effects it has on people, before looking more specifically at how these effects can make us better project managers.

The specific areas of project management that stand to benefit from the effects of awe are then described, including interpersonal management, the management of stakeholders, servancy (servant leadership behaviours applied at both the leader and the team-member level), and the mitigation of social pain.

Ways that project managers might experience more awe, and ways to make the effects of awe persist within us, are then proposed.

The paper concludes with a call-to-action. To make progress with awe we need practice. Picking around the edges won't do it. We need more than visits to the beach and sunsets. We need

practices that reshape the parts of our brains associated with awe. Awe reduces the project manager's sense-of-self and increases their sense of connection to something greater, and in so doing works at a deeper level than the lists of expected behaviours that many practice improvement frameworks depend upon.

The project problem

Projects can suffer significant losses even when governance, management processes and technical capabilities appear adequate. Structures and processes though do not solve defensiveness, stakeholder conflict, organisational silos, resistance to change, or the suppression of bad news.

And they particularly do not solve the problem of *sunk-ego*, the frequently hidden cause of project over-commitment, optimism bias, and strategic misrepresentation. Sunk-ego is a much greater problem than its financial name-sake sunk-cost ([Avery, 2016](#)).

The deeper problem

PMI's 2023 *Pulse of the Profession* report *Power Skills: Redefining Project Success* ([PMI, 2023](#)) defined power skills as “abilities and behaviours that facilitate working with others and help project professionals to succeed in the workplace”. Some individuals and organizations refer to these as “soft skills” or “interpersonal skills.” The study referenced in the PMI pulse report listed the top two power skills as:

- Relationship building
- Collaborative leadership

The underlying problem is articulated by Dr Bent Flyvbjerg, Emeritus Professor at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, and co-author of the best-selling book *How Big Things Get Done* ([Flyvbjerg & Gardner, 2023](#)), saying “Project management is a social science, not engineering. It is done by humans for humans...behavioural science is key to making project management work.” ([Flyvbjerg-PMJ, 2023](#))

As was argued by Maylor and colleagues in their paper *Mind the gap: Towards performance measurement beyond a plan-execute logic* ([Maylor et al., 2023](#)) the traditional project performance metrics of time, cost, and scope often fail as early warning indicators. They are found over and over to be ineffective for correcting the course of troubled projects early in a project's lifecycle.

Maylor et al argued we need to move beyond rigid “plan-execute” monitoring frameworks and prioritise deeper, more dynamic stakeholder collaborations, monitoring and supporting stakeholder views to ensure they feel heard. If we ask them they will tell us. Stakeholder expectations and actual perceptions are not the same.

For those of us working at the coal-face of troubled projects this shift to a stakeholder focus makes so much sense. It is a shift that again emphasises the importance of project management soft skills.

What is awe?

Awe is officially an emotion. It is formally defined as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast and mysterious that transcends our understanding of the world” ([Keltner, 2023](#)).

The vastness does not have to be physical size. It might be beauty, like the sight of a dew drop on a leaf, a work of art or music, or a line of poetry. It might also be the peace of meditation or prayer, or the sight of an act of charity or love.

Awe happens when something ordinary becomes the disclosure of something greater. We don't know what '*the greater*' thing is, but it is reported in study after study on the psychology of awe.

Awe is that moment of 'wow' we experience when we see or experience something beautiful that silences the mind.

Awe works at a deeper level than processes

Because awe decreases self-focus and increases feelings of connectedness, awe is classified as a "self-transcendent experience" ([Yaden & Newberg, 2023](#).) Yaden and Newberg write that awe sits at the boundary between emotions and more intensely altered state of consciousness.

Operating at this level, awe is likely to be much more effective at creating behaviour change in project managers than the lists of 'expected-behaviours' that many practice-improvement frameworks depend upon.

Awe exists on a continuum

Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and the faculty director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Centre, in his ground-breaking book *Awe—The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* ([Keltner, 2023](#)) coined the term "*Everyday awe*" to describe less-intense awe experiences.

When we think of awe we are likely to think of intense experiences triggered by the view from a mountain or the Grand Canyon. But awe, the feeling that we are a part of something bigger that we are connected to and which we don't understand, and that brings us a moment of peace and stillness, is also to be found in everyday things. In Keltner's 26-cultures survey of 2,700 submitted narratives of people's experiences of awe, many people experienced everyday awe two or three times a week.

How does awe make us better project managers?

There have been many studies on the effects of awe in the last 20 years.

A 2015 paper *Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior* ([Piff et al, 2015](#)) reviewed a number of papers on awe and noted among its findings:

- Participants in a study who stood in a grove of towering trees (naturalistic awe) showed significantly more prosocial helping behaviour, and a lower sense of entitlement, than a control group
- Natural tendencies to experience awe predicted greater generosity in a dictator game
- Exposing people to awe improved their ethical decision making, their economic generosity and reinforced their prosocial values.

Another paper "*Awe, the Diminished Self, and Collective Engagement: Universals and Cultural Variations in the Small Self*" ([Bai et al, 2017](#)) observed that effects of awe are not limited to nature-based awe and beauty, but can be found across dramatically different elicitors of awe including ones involving:

- Spirituality, interactions with other people, technology, cultural artifacts, and knowledge.

The above paper also noted that the “*small self*” effect of awe is a likely gateway to all manner of “other”-oriented social behaviours including, and this is important for project management, *collaboration and cooperation*.

In summary, a review of multiple sources of literature on awe reveals many effects likely to be highly beneficial for the managers of high risk, complex, and poor-performing projects. These include:

- *Decreasing* our sense-of-self (our ego) (‘*sunk-ego*’—the ego we invest in project outcomes, is a significant contributor to project failure.)
- *Increasing* our sense of connection to others (critical for effective stakeholder management.)
- *Quieting* the brain’s Default Mode Network (DMN), the brain’s self-reflection system (this reduces anxiety and stress.)
- *Increasing* our sense of connection to ‘*something greater*’ though we don’t know what the ‘something greater’ is (this keeps the project manager grounded, important for managing teams and stakeholder relationships.)
- *Increasing* what neuroscientists and psychologists call ‘saintly tendencies’ — described as the urge to share, to sacrifice our own interests in favour of the interests of others (these tendencies are important for building trust, a critical servant leader outcome.
- *Increasing* our sense of meaning, peace, and free-will (this relaxes us, making us more effective in our work.)
- *Increasing* critical thinking (our thinking becomes more rigorous and energised)
- *Making* us wiser (simply, we make better decisions.)

These effects of awe are highly correlated with the behaviours of successful project leaders and good project team members.

Where these behaviours add value in project management

1. Interpersonal management and the management of stakeholders

Awe experiences benefit interpersonal management through:

- *Empathy—The ability to understand people’s feelings*
- *Agreeableness—The tendency toward cooperation, maintenance of social harmony, and consideration of the concerns of others”*

Stakeholder management, a dimension of project management requiring much greater attention in projects than it usually does, benefits greatly from these skills.

A 2014 research paper *Stakeholder analysis and engagement in projects: From stakeholder relational perspective to stakeholder relational ontology* ([Missionier & Loufrani-Fedida, 2014](#)) found that:

“Whatever the nature of the project, various researchers have acknowledged that project failure is generally not the result of lacking or ineffective project management practices, but of inappropriate social interactions between the project and stakeholders”

High-performance stakeholder management and good interpersonal relationship management are important keys to project success.

Awe boosts skills important for stakeholder and interpersonal relationship management.

2. Servancy—leading and following

Servant Leadership is a style of leadership highly regarded for its ability to build team performance, reduce outcome risk, and increase project success rates ([Avery, 2016](#)).

Servancy is the practice of Servant Leadership, practiced either as a team member or a team leader.

Experiences of awe improve servancy.

Servancy is the opposite of narcissism. Narcissism is ‘service to self’—behaviours where people put their own interests ahead of others. Studies tell us that narcissism is over-represented in high risk projects (and in executive leadership generally), likely contributing to high levels of loss in large and complex projects.

Robert K. Greenleaf, the father of Servant Leadership theory, wrote "*The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first*" ([Greenleaf, 1970](#)).

The key skills of Servant leadership (and servancy in general) were listed by van Dierendonck in his paper *Servant leadership: A review and synthesis* ([van Dierendonck, 2011](#)) as:

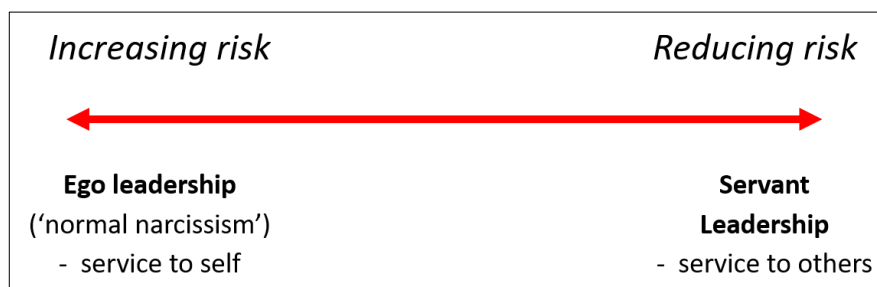
- *Humility*: Recognizing one’s strengths and limitations while valuing the contributions of others.
- *Empathy*: Understanding and sharing in the experiences of others with genuine concern.
- *Authenticity*: Acting with integrity and aligning one’s actions with inner values.
- *Empowering and Developing Others*: Actively fostering the growth and well-being of those around us.
- *Interpersonal Acceptance*: Embracing others as they are, with compassion and without judgment.

All highly important for project managers and all enhanced by experiences of awe.

For discussion on the power of servant leadership to dramatically reduce project risks see the book *Project Management, Denial and Death Zone* ([Avery, 2016](#)), winner of a RiskNZ Exemplar award, and a David I. Cleland Project Management Literature Award nominee.

The Servancy Continuum

The Servancy Continuum schematic below shows the relationship between servancy and narcissism.



Awe has been found to directly reduce service-to-self and increase service to others.

3. Mitigating Social Pain

Awe experiences mitigate social pain.

Social pain is defined as the distressing or unpleasant experience that arises from the perception of actual or potential damage to one's sense of social connection or social value. It encompasses the emotional distress caused by social rejection, exclusion, negative social evaluation, or interpersonal loss. ([Eisenberger, 2012](#))

We cause social pain in people by damaging:

- Their sense of social connection (e.g. by saying “*you are not part of the team*”)
- Their sense of social value (e.g. by saying “*you are wrong about that*” or “*we don’t like your ideas*”)
- Their sense of being understood (e.g. by saying “*we don’t get you*”).

Social pain triggers in us, in our leadership and team-membership behaviours, our fight, flight, or freeze response. Sometimes this happens quietly (people stop participating, and quietly withdraw), and sometimes it happens loudly (people argue, or ‘dig-in’ on their positions.) These responses dramatically reduce team performance and dramatically increase project risk.

Awe, because it reduces the *sense-of-self*, has the power to reduce, and even solve, the social pain that many of us at times suffer from.

How can we experience more awe?

Over the last 20 years there have been many studies on the subject of awe. These studies identify activities that have been found to trigger awe—be it a moment of quiet everyday awe, or an intense self-transcendent experience.

These triggers include:

- Walking in nature, in forests, alongside rivers, lakes or the sea
- High snowy mountains
- Sunsets and sunrises
- Art that quiets the mind
- Music that stills the mind
- Meditation and prayer
- Experiences of moral beauty (giving, or witnessing, kindness, love or goodness)
- Reading works of poetry, philosophy, reflection, or wisdom
- Visits to spiritual places
- Viewing earth from space (the *Overview Effect*) (if you have the right connections!)

These experiences cause changes in us that can last for hours or days, and if we experience them often enough, can change us permanently.

Stop doing the wrong things

As well as doing things that create more awe in us, more peace, we must stop doing things that disrupt our peace. We need to:

- Disconnect from organisations and people who pull us down or who don't get us
- Disconnect from the wrong goals, the wrong places, and the wrong habits

Neuroplasticity, the key to sustainable awe-based change

It is one thing to be a better project manager on a Monday morning after a walk in nature the day before, but how can we make such improvement stick?

The answer is found in neuroplasticity. The more we practice or perform a behaviour, the more our brain reconnects itself, changes its very structure, to make performing that behaviour easier the next time we want to do it. It is the reason that exercise becomes easier after a few weeks of persisting at it; why better eating habits become easier after a few weeks of persisting with them, and why giving up smoking or other bad habits becomes easier after a few weeks of persisting with those.

The effect of neuroplasticity explains how our brains change their structures to take on new habits, and change bad habits. But it takes two or three or four weeks of us repeating a new behaviour before our brain decides to make permanent changes to its neural structures, for the change to become hard-wired in. Hard-wiring makes the desired behaviour easier to perform next time.

To really make progress with awe we need practice. Picking around the edges won't do it. We need more than visits to the beach and sunsets. We need practice to reshape key parts of our brain associated with awe. Top athletes complement their mind-sets with structures and guidance and regular practice. We need to do the same by experiencing more awe in our lives.

Your call to action

Keltner in his book *Awe—The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* (Keltner, 2023) wrote:

“You might have thought that when we more often experience awe in the wonders of life, those wonders lose their power. This is known as the law of hedonic adaptation, that certain pleasures—consumer purchases, drinking a savory beer, or eating chocolate, for example—diminish with their increased occurrence. Not so with awe. The more we practice awe, the richer it gets.”

Ways to make awe a regular part of your life

Consider:

- Setting times to meditate and walk every day
- Joining a club of like-minded people—walking-in-nature, art, music, philosophy, hiking
- Joining a spiritual, meditation or prayer group
- Set up an “Awe for Project Management” interest group in your workplace or city.

Whether it is everyday awe, or the intense awe of a mystical experience, by regularly engaging in activities known to trigger awe, awe's richness, supported by brain neuroplasticity, can create high-return changes in us likely to benefit the projects we manage, and ourselves personally.

Conclusion

Projects suffer significant losses even when governance, management processes and technical capabilities appear adequate. Structures and processes though do not solve defensiveness, stakeholder conflict, organisational silos, resistance to change, or the suppression of bad news.

Because project success depends fundamentally on human cooperation, project management must be treated as a social science, not an engineering discipline. It is an endeavour executed by humans, for humans ([Flyvbjerg-PMJ, 2023](#)). The mastering of stakeholder engagement, interpersonal dynamics, and team leadership is paramount. Behavioural science holds the key to unlocking project success.

Within the behavioural toolkit that project managers are increasingly reaching for, awe represents an untapped, high-leverage resource for de-risking complex, high-risk, and troubled projects. By triggering psychological change, awe dismantles defensive self-interest, opens individuals to alternative perspectives, and equips leaders with the empathy, humility, and collective purpose required to build trust in teams and stakeholders.

Because awe operates at the level of human consciousness, shrinking the self and increasing feelings of connectedness, awe is likely to be much more effective at creating behaviour change in project managers than the lists of expected-behaviours that many practice improvement frameworks currently depend on.

Cultivating a deliberate practice of awe can generate neuroplastic changes that not only transform project success rates, but fundamentally enrich the well-being and longevity of the project managers leading them.

About the author

Grant Avery is an international project consultant, author, and speaker specialising in project assurance and risk reduction in complex and high-risk projects, programmes, and portfolios. He is the founder and director of [Outcome Insights](#), a leading Australasian consultancy established in 2012, and is co-author of the international P3M3® (v3.0) capabilities maturity model.

Grant is the author of the critically acclaimed book, [Project Management, Denial, and the Death Zone](#) (JRoss Publishing Inc., 2016), which won a RiskNZ Exemplar Award and was nominated for the international PMI Cleland Award. His latest book, *Messages from a Quiet Land: Revelations of the Divine in Awe, Silence, and Science* (2026), bridges science, theology, and behavioural psychology, drawing heavily from his personal encounters with awe and the sublime in Antarctica.

Grant's unique perspective on the role of awe, psychological resilience, and the reduction of project risk was forged in the 1990s when he set a record (501 days) for the longest unbroken stay living and working at New Zealand's national Antarctic science station, Scott Base. Initially responsible for the base's geophysics programme, Avery went on to become the New Zealand Government's senior representative in Antarctica.

During his time in Antarctica, which included two winters and three summers, Avery experienced the intense awe that the beauty and isolation of Antarctica can trigger. In his spare time Avery meditated and prayed in some of Antarctica's most beautiful places, and as a part-time Search and Rescue Team leader, some of its most fearsome.

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