# Planisware

# Soft Skills for Managing IT Projects

## an Interactive Checklist

# Introduction

Project managers are contending with more than the 'triple constraint of scope, time and budget', according to **PMI's 2020 *Pulse* report**. The data collected in the surveys show that most companies place an almost equal priority on **developing leadership skills** (65%) as they do technical skills (68%).

With the shift from **Waterfall to Agile methodologies**, IT project managers require soft skills to work with collaborators effectively.
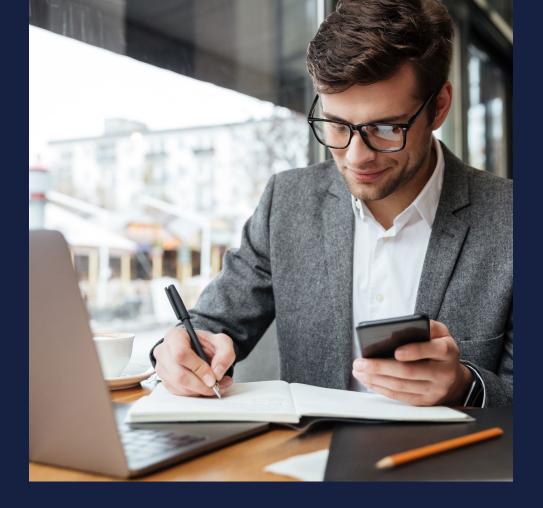
They have to:

1. **Interact with non-IT stakeholders, including end users**
2. **Manage and lead their development and QA teams**
3. **Act as interface between the project team and C-Suite stakeholders**

Dealing with all of those people (and priorities, and challenges) can be daunting at first. But, brush up on your soft skills and you'll be best positioned to drive improvements.

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> **The advantage goes not to those with the greatest technology acumen but to those who can combine that know-how with uniquely human qualities to meet increasingly complex and ambiguous challenges.**
>
> — **PMI's Pulse of the Profession (2021) report**

In this guide, we'll take you through a few of the soft skills you'll need as an IT manager, with checklists along the way to help you track your progress. **You're never finished learning soft skills, so save this document and revisit it at regular intervals**.

Let's start with a short definition.

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# What are
# Soft Skills?

Soft skills are **non-technical skills**. They relate to how you **work, interact and deal** with other people. Sometimes they are referred to as leadership skills, people skills, emotional intelligence or interactive skills. Soft skills include things like: communication, attitudes, team building, facilitation decision-making and more.

It's time to take a look at some of these skills and how you can hone them for your next IT project and beyond. First up is communication.

# Communication

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> **The area of communication is the language of leadership.**
>
> — **James Humes**, former Presidential speechwriter

Great communication is the backbone of project management (in particular for Agile projects). However, the **PMI** found that **one of the top causes of IT project failure reported by companies is poor communication**.

## What does communication mean when you are an IT project manager?

When you're running an IT project, communication is about being there for your team; having visibility on the challenges of the project; understanding any issues within your team and also understanding the issues of those for whom the project is being delivered.

To succeed at communicating there are a few key things you can work on. According to **CIO** the **key areas that differentiate a highly effective project leader from a project manager** include:

**Trustworthiness**

**Transparency**

**Focus and stability**

**Objectivity and fairness**

**Confidence**

## 💬 Communication Checklist
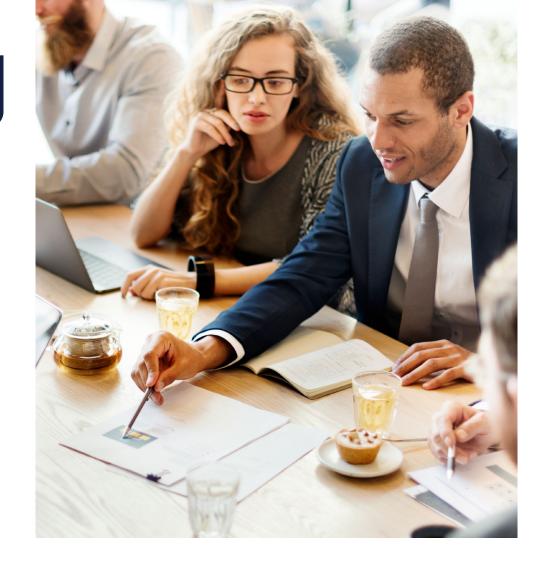
### The crucial nodder

How you deliver your message is key, but so is the ability to read the room and choose the right moment to propose your idea. Understanding body language and knowing when to speed up or go deeper on a certain topic can make all the difference when delivering project proposals to senior executives. To ensure you keep your cool and prepare yourself for that big proposal, you need to identify the "crucial nodder" within the meeting.

☐   Learn who the crucial nodder is within your organization

The **crucial nodder** within your organization is the person to whom your CEO will turn, in order to affirm what you're saying. You need that person to give a gesture of approval to the boss as anything short of that will not invite engaging follow-up questions. Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Before you present your idea figure out who the crucial nodders are and consult them on your idea. Remember they can be multiple and may also vary based on the issue.**

- **Even if you do not think there is a crucial nodder, consult someone whose opinion is trusted by the boss.**

- **Read a more in-depth analysis into project proposals to senior executives here.**

**Notes:**

## Choose curiosity over clash

Things do not always go the way you expect and when you find yourself distinctively disagreeing with someone, choosing curiosity over clash can avoid nasty arguments and tensions. Choosing curiosity when you really want to "lash out" at someone involves asking one simple question: "I never thought about it that way before. What can you share, that will help me see, what you see?"

> ☐ Choose curiosity over clash in **three** situations by utilizing the above question

Tick this box once you have encountered three situations (personal or professional) where you were distinctively disagreeing with someone and wanted to react assertively but instead decided to ask them to explain their opinion in more detail.

- **Note how the more curious you become about the other person's point of view, the more interested they will become in your opinion. They will begin to wonder what it is that you see, and whether they could see it too.**

- **A constructive conversation will only be possible if you are willing to adapt. If you go into a conversation expecting everyone to come out with the same opinion you will fail from the outset.**

**Notes:**

## Structure your agenda with questions

Sometimes your communication is simply doomed from the outset due to a haphazard organization of meetings that serve more as an excuse for some chit-chat rather than a step to obtaining objectives. **The meeting agenda either sets your meeting up for focused and effective work, or for unstructured conversations** around the topic. By listing the agenda items as **questions rather than vague bullet points**, you can first, identify the people essential to answering the questions and second, eliminate anyone who is not capable of answering the questions from the meeting.

☐ Create an agenda for **four** meetings with questions rather than bullet points

Tick this box once you have utilized questions to create the agenda for four meetings. Here are some pointers to get started:

• **Use this approach to determine who needs to be at your meetings (the people essential to answering the questions) and when to end the meeting (once all the questions have been answered).**

• **Make your colleagues aware of the new meeting agenda and distribute it in advance to ensure they have time to think about the questions to be answered.**

• **Remember if you can't think of any questions to be asked then the meeting may not be needed in the first place. Read this article for more detail on this technique.**

**Notes:**

💡 **Looking for more resources to improve your communication skills?**

Head to our **Link Roundup for essential articles and videos on effective communication**

# Active Listening

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> **Leaders who refuse to listen will soon find themselves surrounded by people with nothing to say.**
>
> — **Andy Stanley**, communicator, author and pastor

## What is active listening?

Active or focused listening is the ability to give your undivided attention to what people are saying to you. It means you can understand their message, comprehend the information and respond thoughtfully.

Effective communication and active listening go hand in hand. It's a powerful soft skill, but it needs to be cultivated. Sounds easy, right? Well, it can be extremely difficult to master. When you're knee-deep in the middle of an active IT project, for example, you might find you're not prepared to engage in focused listening.

On the flip side, ineffective listening can leave your team feeling under-appreciated. A Journal of Business Ethics report called **'Is My Boss Really Listening to Me?...'** shows that a lack of listening can result in low morale, absenteeism and employee turnover. Improving your ability to listen won't just affect your leadership skills — it'll impact your development team's overall motivation and productivity.

## ((•)) Active Listening Checklist

Before delving into the details of Active Listening let's first get to grips with the core components of this subtle technique. If you have ever seen a psychologist you will understand the incredible ability they have to digest the information and articulate a purposeful response. This ability comes from the three components of active listening; comprehending, retaining and responding.

### 1. Comprehending

Comprehending sounds easy on paper but there are often numerous barriers created particularly within large organizations where there can be large ranges in age, culture, social rank (and colleagues commonly converse using jargon or in a language other than their native one). The key behind this skill often lies in asking yourself the question: if I explained this to a five year old, would they understand?

### 2. Retaining

Retaining is the next step to formulating your response. This steps requires deep concentration and self-awareness in order to suppress our ego and listen to what is actually being said rather than the details we want to hear. Understanding common cognitive biases (which we will explore more below) is essential in succeeding at this step.

### 3. Responding

The final component is responding. This step involves careful thought, and an illustrated understanding that you listened to the other side. For an impactful response we must find the deeper meaning that lies beneath the words.

## Learn about cognitive biases

Active listening requires an understanding of how cognitive biases and shortcuts impact our communication. Common cognitive biases include *social proof* and *availability bias* while there is also *conversational narcissism* where people turn the conversation about themselves.

> ☐ Learn 3 common cognitive biases + the traits of conversational narcissism

Tick this box when you are actively listening to someone and you recognize one of the cognitive biases in either yourself or the other person. Some tips for starting:

- **Avoid trying to respond immediately. Allow the other person time to finish speaking, then provide a considered response.**

- **Minimize conversational narcissism by keeping track of your use of pronouns. An over-reliance on 'I' and 'me' can indicate a desire to steer the conversation towards yourself. Aim to make liberal use of 'you' instead.**

- **To get to grips with the above topics check out this article.**

**Notes:**

## Teach yourself to use Focused Listening

Focused listening not only helps you build trust with project stakeholders but also allows you to weed out any problems or risks before they come to full fruition. If someone's expressing concern, it's worth understanding and addressing it before it becomes a full-blown roadblock. Remote work has created a certain barrier between colleagues, and understanding telltale signs of issues from video conferences can be difficult. The next pointer is a simple yet effective way of becoming a more engaged and reactive manager.

> ☐  Close your laptop (in presence) or expand your screen (online) in the next three 1:1 meetings

Tick this box once you feel you have engaged in focused listening in three separate meetings and noted the results and any differences. Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Look out for some courses (check out this example) on active and focused listening - are there any your company could support you in taking?**

- **Pay attention to what you're doing in stand-ups or reporting meetings - are you really paying attention?**

**Notes:**

**Looking for more resources to improve your active listening skills?**

Head to our **Link Round Up for awesome articles and videos on how to develop your ability to listen**

# Decision-Making

> Good decisions come from experience. Experience comes from making bad decisions.
>
> — **Mark Twain**

## What's involved in making decisions as a project manager?

Depending on the type of decision that needs to be made, you will have different sets of criteria that come into play when making a judgment. Consider going through the following steps when making tough calls:

- **Define the problems and variables clearly at the outset.**
- **Brainstorm solutions as a team**
- **Explore pros and cons of various options**
- **Secure group buy-in on the chosen solution**
- **Make peace with your decision**

How you analyze individual options will vary depending on the project. During the decision-making process, take into account the *type of choice* that is being made. Is it an emergency, operational, routine or strategic business decision? Consider how the choice you're going to make will affect other stakeholders. If you're unsure at any stage in the process, it's a good idea to get opinions from peers or colleagues.

☐ Use a decision journal to evaluate three consequential decisions, either individually or as part of a group

🖇 **Here's an example of a Decision Journal** courtesy of **Farnam Street.**

Tick this box once you have evaluated three different decisions and developed awareness for hindsight bias that has hindered you. Here are some pointers to get started with your journal:

- **Be clear. Be direct. Be simple. An 8-year-old should understand what decision you're making and why.**

- **Realizing where you make mistakes, how you make them, what types of decisions you're bad at, etc., helps you make better decisions going forward. When you start to identify patterns, you can change your decision process to help account for the things you miss.**

- **Just because you had a bad outcome doesn't mean you made a bad decision. You might have made the right decision and still had a bad outcome. It's called a bad break.**

**Notes:**

# ✛ Decision-Making Checklist

## Start a decision journal

We all make decisions. And yet few of us think about what we can learn from our past decisions to make smarter decisions in the future. A decision journal helps you learn from past decisions, think through current decisions, and preempt problems before they happen.

## Three Step Decisions

Educated decisions can also be made based on tried and tested techniques used by professionals in very high-pressure situations. A three-step principle used to ensure you have included every element in your decision is:

1. **Challenge the constraints**
2. **Embrace a pre-mortem**
3. **Check the basics**

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☐     Use the three-step principle to make five decisions

Tick this box once you've made your five decisions and you have noted in each situation how you accomplished each step. Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Challenge the constraints involves analyzing what barriers are holding you back from making better decisions and finding ways to work around those.**

- **A pre-mortem is a technique where you imagine what failure would look like *before* you ever down the path. Invest the time upfront in finding out how an idea you're contemplating could end in failure.**

- **In the first steps, you are required to think outside the box but for checking the basics you are ensuring that the overlooked simple elements are in place. Never let the minute details be the downfall of a great decision.**

- **For the full low down on how to use this three-step technique, watch this video by Matthew Confer.**

**Notes:**

### Looking for more resources to improve your decision making skills?

Head to our **Link Round Up for awesome articles and videos on practicing better decision making**

# Conflict Resolution

> **If we manage conflict constructively, we harness its energy for creativity and development.**
>
> — **Mark Twain**

Where there are people, there will be conflicting interests and opinions. Conflict doesn't have to be a bad thing. The ability to **manage friction** in teams is one of the key skills an IT project manager must learn in order to effectively run a project.

There are many reasons conflict can come to the surface — competition for a finite resource, inconsistent communication, unclear briefs, lagging systems, company policies — the list goes on.

# Conflict Resolution Checklist

## Create a conflict resolution contract
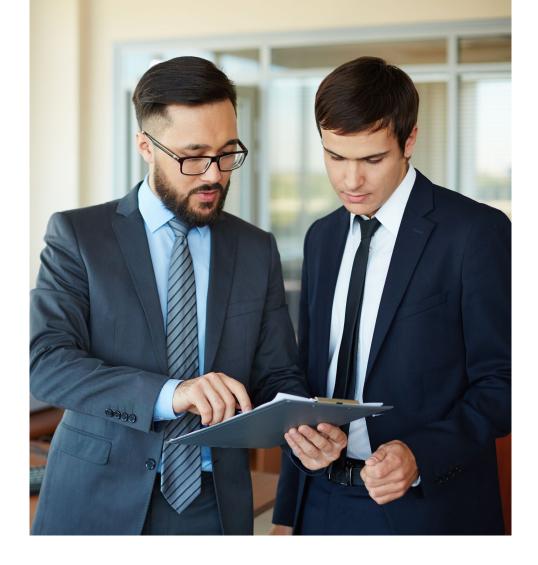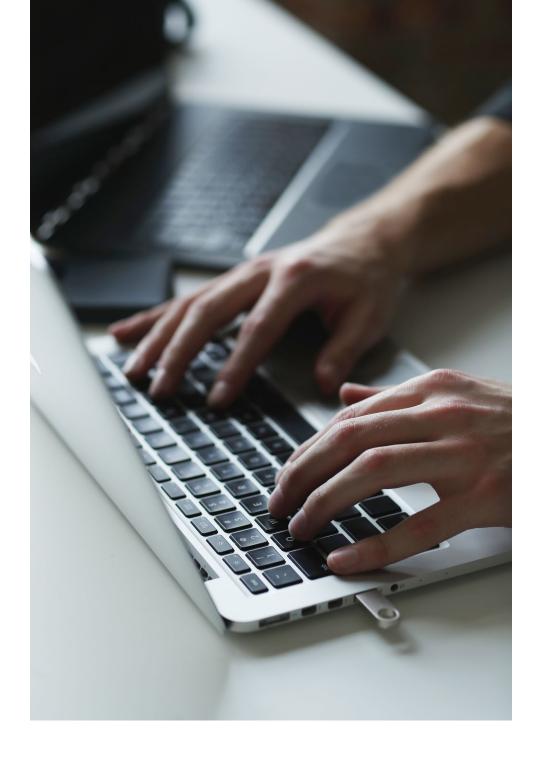
To **resolve conflict**, you need to accept that to reach a compromise, some form of debate and disagreement is necessary. The first point that we will encourage you to implement within your teams or suggest to management is a contract that lays out the set of behaviors you expect everyone to respect when conflict happens, and why they are useful to achieve your objectives.

☐    Create a conflict resolution contract

Tick this box once your team has had a discussion on the set of behaviors they expect to arise amidst conflict, and you've **put on paper in a common contract**. Here are some pointers to get started:

• **Involve everyone when creating the contract to create full commitment on the rules.**

• **Be wary of Artificial Harmony which is basically keeping all your thoughts to yourself during the meeting and reliving your anger after the meeting. This can be just as destructive as confrontational/personal attacks.**

• **An example to get you started based on the above problem of Artificial Harmony is: "We will not prioritize relief (agreeing with someone because you can't stand the conflict anymore) over resolution".**

**Notes:**

## Implement Canvas view

Using Agile methodologies means there needs to be a constant source of feedback from the team and back to the project. Feedback is a team effort and comes from the client stakeholders and the development team. In many organizations when conflict arises, it is often the loudest voices that get heard rather than the most valuable opinions. To avoid this problem we recommend implementing canvas views into your meetings once you have recognized that a conflict is present. Canvas views are a quick tour of the table that lets everyone express their opinion on the problem.

> ☐  Implement Canvas views as a mandatory requirement once conflict arises

Tick this box once you've successfully solved a conflict using a canvas view. Here are some pointers to get started:

*   **You can use techniques such as "planning poker" or "value poker" to canvas views when you are having varied types of conflict.**

*   **For more information on the above two techniques watch Julia Whitney's six C's.**

**Notes:**

## Managing your Emotions

When conflict arises it can escalate very easily, especially when emotions get involved. Some team members might find it hard to explain their thoughts and this might lead to physical conflict. Before addressing any issue, pause and take a breath. Stay calm, gather your thoughts, and make sure you can keep the conflict amicable.

> ☐ Use the 4-7-8 breathing technique and practice physical reorientation by touching objects and observing your surrounding space in a conflict situation

Tick this box once you've successfully handled a conflict situation where you managed to control your frustration using breathing and physical object to regain perspective. Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Breathe, use and validate the use of apps like Calm or Headspace to relieve tension and stress from you and your team.**

- **Get to empathy and create bridges with people in conflict situations. Practice the art of active listening we discussed above to show that you care.**

- **Always remember that you are not giving in to the other person by not reacting or staying passive. You are learning how to deal with the problem and creating an intelligent response to be your best self, not an irrational version of yourself.**

- **Find out more information on this technique here.**

**Notes:**

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💡 **Looking for more resources to improve your conflict management skills?**

Head to our **Link Round Up for awesome articles and videos on the essentials in managing conflict with your teams**

# Teamwork

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## The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.

— **Phil Jackson**, professional basketball player and coach

Most of the time, IT projects will involve a variety of people from devs to IT operations to testing teams and so on. Your central project team will interact with most of the main stakeholders, but (more importantly) they'll be working with each other. For teams to collaborate effectively, there needs to be a culture of trust.
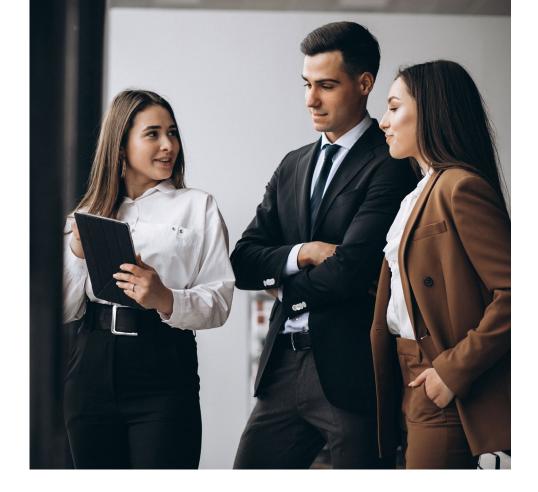
## 👥👥 Teamwork Checklist

### Write down "unwritten rules"

Teamwork ultimately boils down to employees feeling comfortable in their working environment. To create this comfort and a real bond between colleagues, it is useful to put unwritten rules on paper. For example, if you're on a video call with twenty of your colleagues, is it okay to turn your camera off? When you email your boss, do you include a bunch of emojis?

> ☐    Write down your team's unwritten rules

Tick this box once you've written down the rules and there is a procedure to make this list available to new hires. Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Update this list on a quarterly basis or if there is a change in your working situation (for example remote working due to covid).**

- **A good angle to approach this is to ask employees to write individual "it's okay to...." lists and then make a global list with the compiled ideas.**

- **Don't hesitate to use this poster for external communication to attract new candidates for a job. For more on unwritten rules, read this article.**

**Notes:**

## Invest in building trust

Make some time during standups and other team meetings to invest in building trust and camaraderie. A team that gets on well will be more likely to want to help each other during rough times. The goal is to develop a project environment that helps people bond with one another.

☐ Host team-building exercises and ice-breakers

Tick this box once you completed five separate team-building activities or social events. Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Build a list of fun facts about team members and have other members guess who they're about.**

- **Organize social activities both online and if possible, in person.**

**Notes:**



💡 **Looking for more resources to improve your team management skills?**

Head to our **Link Round Up for awesome articles and videos on how to build and lead good teams**

# Time Management

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> ## How does a project get to be a year late? One day at a time.
>
> — **Frederick Brooks**, software engineer and computer scientist

Since managing IT projects includes responsibilities around budgeting, allocating resources, and managing project timelines, IT project managers must be highly organized planners.

One of the key reasons businesses look for project managers is to find someone capable of organizing a large number of moving parts.

So, how can you improve your time management? Here are 15 key skills that will help you get on top of your time:

- Prioritizing
- Delegation
- Goal setting
- Multitasking
- Problem solving
- Strategic thinking
- Scheduling
- Record keeping
- Organization and documentation
- Meeting deadlines
- Self-awareness
- Stress management
- Strategic planning
- Resource management
- Assessment and evaluation

Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. That's why excellent time management is an important part of an IT project manager's organizational efforts.

# Time Management Checklist

## Find your peak performance time

Time management tools alone rarely produce the desired effects if they are not backed up with tested strategies and skills. The first hurdle to understanding how to manage your time better is getting a solid structure of 1) in what environment and 2) what time of the day you are most efficient.

| ☐ | Find your peak performance time |
|---|---|

Tick this box once you've divided your typical day into three or four time slots and, over the course of a week, rank-order these slots from your most to least productive (most productive is peak performance). Here are some pointers to get started:

- **Ensure to take into account the type of work you are doing and your energy levels.**

- **Once you have compiled your peak performance times, start assessing how long it takes to complete certain tasks and projects. Create two different assessments; how long you thought it would take and how long it actually took. Check this technique out in more detail here.**

**Notes:**

## Time Blocking

Understanding the above "peak performance time" will set you up nicely for the next technique: Time Blocking. This is a time management method that requires you to divide your day into blocks of time, with each block representing a specific task or group of tasks. Each day you have a structured schedule that allows you to prioritize tasks and focus on what's really important (i.e the critical rather than the urgent).

|  | Use Time Blocking method daily for two weeks |
|---|---|

Tick this box once you have used Time Blocking daily for two weeks, and completed at least two tasks from scratch using the technique. Here are some tips for to avoid common mistakes:

- **You do not need time management software to do Time Blocking, all that is required is a notepad where you can create the blocks with the time of the day in the margin.**

- **When starting off, you should err on the side of blocking off too much time. At the end of the day, review how you can adjust these blocks for the future.**

- **Another common mistake people run into is being too rigid with their plans. There should be space left on the page to jump from the original plan to a revised plan. Things will come up and you need to be able to adapt.**

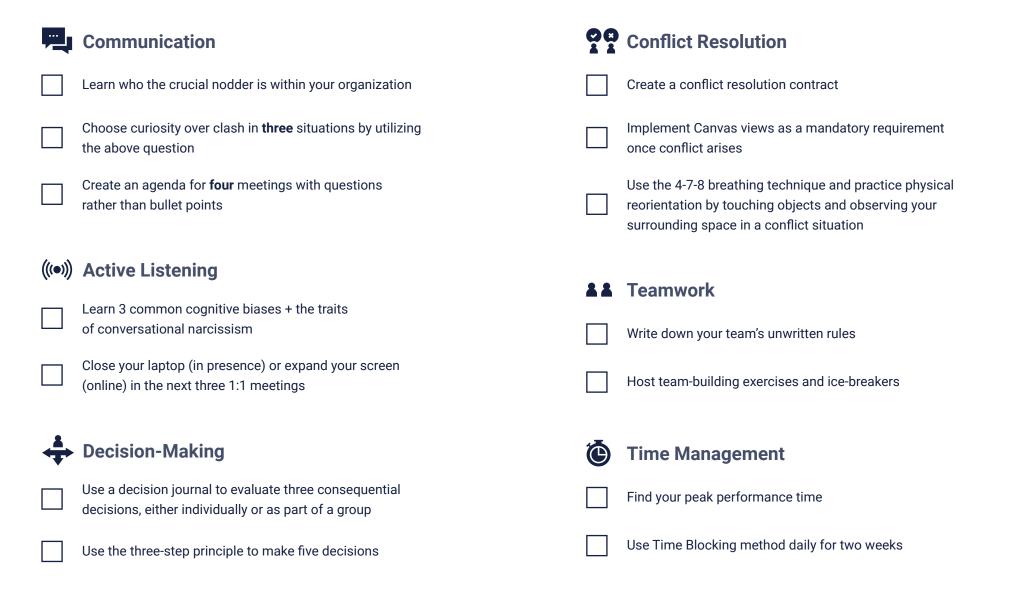- **For a full description of this technique based on Cal Newport's methodology read this article.**

**Notes:**

### Looking for more resources to improve your time management skills?

Head to our **Link Round Up for awesome articles and videos about how to better control your time**

# Checklist Summary

## Communication

☐ Learn who the crucial nodder is within your organization

☐ Choose curiosity over clash in **three** situations by utilizing the above question

☐ Create an agenda for **four** meetings with questions rather than bullet points

## Active Listening

☐ Learn 3 common cognitive biases + the traits of conversational narcissism

☐ Close your laptop (in presence) or expand your screen (online) in the next three 1:1 meetings

## Decision-Making

☐ Use a decision journal to evaluate three consequential decisions, either individually or as part of a group

☐ Use the three-step principle to make five decisions

## Conflict Resolution

☐ Create a conflict resolution contract

☐ Implement Canvas views as a mandatory requirement once conflict arises

☐ Use the 4-7-8 breathing technique and practice physical reorientation by touching objects and observing your surrounding space in a conflict situation

## Teamwork

☐ Write down your team's unwritten rules

☐ Host team-building exercises and ice-breakers

## Time Management

☐ Find your peak performance time

☐ Use Time Blocking method daily for two weeks

# Practice
## Makes Perfect

While IT project management does require technical aptitude, the success of a project manager is often closely associated with their softer skills, particularly due to the importance of dealing with stakeholder expectations. Soft skills won't come overnight. They take practice and active learning, and are often harder to measure than technical aptitude.

But, with increasing numbers of IT projects being owned by line-of-business departments, cross-business communication and collaboration skills are essential and can't be allowed to fall by the wayside.

You're never really finished learning soft skills: as you gain experience and mature, you should revisit these skills and try to continuously improve. This checklist is something you can come back to at regular intervals to create a development plan and reach the next level.

# About
# Planisware

Planisware is a global provider of software solutions for project portfolio management. Planisware solutions are specifically designed to support product development, engineering and IT business processes.

For more than 20 years, Planisware has been helping its customers to achieve strategic and innovative excellence, make valid business decisions and increase portfolio value. Today, over 500 companies worldwide rely on Planisware products to manage their projects, resources and portfolios.

## Click below to find out more about Planisware's Strategic Portfolio Management capabilities

**Find out more**