



**The People-Pleasing Project Manager;**  
*Why Nice Guys Make Terrible Project Leaders*

We've all heard that saying, "Nice guys finish last." But when you really stop to think about that statement, why would people say that? And do we really know what that means? I mean, isn't it a good thing to be nice?

After all, there are a lot of great things about nice guys. They tend to be givers; generous with their time and attention. They're good at taking care of others. Nice guys are known to put others' needs before their own; a good thing in an increasingly self-centered world. They seek to do the right thing, and prevent things from going wrong. And more.

So why do we say "Nice guys finish last?"

Let me tell you a story...

I was working with a successful project manager, and we were discussing some of the challenges he felt he was facing in moving his career forward. He felt as though he had reached a plateau, and wasn't making progress. He began telling me that most of the time he felt like he was working on his projects seemingly alone, and that he was beginning to resent the lack of support he felt from his teams and his supervisor. In fact, he even went so far as to say he felt like he was the only one who cared about his projects and how they turned out.

I started asking questions about how he had come to that conclusion, and as he answered, it seems I started to recognize some well-known patterns I had seen before. But what were they? And where did I know them from?

Then it hit me. Trying to be perfect. The only one who works hard. Passive aggressive tendencies. Not asking for what he wants or needs. Resenting his coworkers.

Damn! I knew this pattern because it was MY pattern! This is the classic nice guy in action!

Certainly, we don't embrace people who we think are the opposite – we have names for that kind of person. And we tend to not like those things in ourselves either. The truth is, however, that being a nice guy can actually be a tremendous detriment to your leadership and long-term success.

Let me explain.



While each person is unique, there are some fundamental characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors associated with what we've come to know as a "nice guy." And when you add up all of these behaviors, the outcome points to inconsistent, ineffective, and sometimes downright dismal leadership. Also, for the sake of clarity and fairness, this is not a set of characteristics confined solely to males. I use the term "nice guy" to categorize both men and women who portray these traits.

Before I get too far into this, it's only fair that I come clean with you. I've been a nice guy for most of my life. And in looking back over the course of my life and leadership, most of the time it's been far more of a burden than a blessing. And I know I'm not the only one here who either has faced or is facing this challenge. So sit back, listen to what I have to say, and see if you are either a nice guy yourself, or if you know and work with one – or more.

Today, I'm going to tell you how you can identify whether or not you are a nice guy (or gal), I'll outline four of the most common ways that being a nice guy is actually impeding your growth as an effective project leader, and finally I will provide you with some strategies to help you begin to make the shift from the drive to be liked, to the drive to be effective and respected. Know this – they are not the same thing!

1. One of the first things you'll notice about the nice guy leader is that they are typically borderline obsessed with "doing it right," which can sometimes even mean it has to be perfect. At times you will see the People-Pleasing Project Manager (PPPM) as a complete control freak. They cannot let go of things out of fear that the situation will spin out of control.

The PPPM is intent on trying to keep their lives smooth and uneventful. Their mantra is "If I can only do this perfect and make sure to follow the rules, everything will turn out right." What happens instead is an almost complete lack of spontaneity, creativity, and fun. Doing it right and trying to be perfect is incredibly constricting.

Add to that the fact that they feel the need to fix things when they appear to be wrong. This means that when presented with an issue, challenge, or problem, their natural inclination is to "fix" what's broken – whether you asked for help or not.

2. Nice guys are almost always preoccupied with making other people happy. On a fundamental level we all know this is impossible. But to the nice guy, it's merely that no one else has figured out how to do it right, up until now!

When you're trying to make everyone else happy, the first thing you notice is how unhappy you are! It's difficult enough to make even one person happy. How in the



heck are you going to manage the monumental task of making everyone on your team happy? How often does that happen? How about never!

Add to that the fact that most people pleasers have a hard time asking for help, and do not delegate well out of fear of making someone on the team unhappy.

What's the cost to you when you try to maintain that impossible standard? The most common thing I've noticed in the PM's I've worked with is that they end up taking on way more work themselves. The result is a tremendous amount of stress, overwhelm, anxiety, and a feeling of being completely insignificant.

And even if the project should somehow end up meeting objectives, the PPPM rarely feels any sense of achievement due to the fact that they've worked themselves to the bone trying to get the project done. At best, they feel a sense of relief. At worst, they dread the next project coming down the pike!

3. Nice guys tend to avoid conflict. This is a big one, folks, and it ties back in with the need to make others happy. So many people have an aversion to conflict, but to the PPPM, conflict is a huge red light that can bring just about every fear they have into play.

First of all, let's be clear about what conflict is. It is neither good nor bad. It's simply an indication that there is some disagreement or difference of opinion on an issue that needs to be addressed. What makes conflict bad is the way we've been taught to handle it. More often than not, we take an approach that says one of us will win and the other will lose. That makes conflict unproductive and negative.

For the PPPM, conflict presents a challenge to their identity. Part of the label of being a nice guy precludes the ability to be the opposite – whether you call that a bully, a jerk, or some other less-than-flattering name. In the face of conflict, the PPPM struggles with taking a stand for their beliefs and risking the anger or disapproval of their colleagues.

So what does the nice guy do? Well, she certainly doesn't ruffle any feathers, that's for sure. In fact, she'll take the peacemaker approach, and attempt to make sure everyone else is happy; which we've already established is impossible.

They see conflict in absolutes. I'm either the nice guy, or I'm the bully. No in-between. The one person who walks away dissatisfied is him. And he feels like a martyr.



You see, in a situation rife with conflict, the PPPM hesitates to take a stand for fear of being rejected or being seen as a pusher, or a bully. And one of the knocks on him is that people don't know what he stands for. That's a problem when there is a tough decision to be made. People don't have the confidence that this person can make the tough decisions when necessary.

But rest assured that when he does walk away from the situation without being able to get the perfect resolution, he still feels vindicated because in his mind he tried everything he knows to get things to work out. "It's not my fault things didn't go well," he says to himself.

And when things really go against his wishes, he walks away muttering under his breath and resenting the other person or persons – even though they may have no idea why. He never took a stand, but that doesn't mean he won't hold it against you. It's classic passive-aggressive behavior. The nice guy expresses his feelings in manipulative, indirect ways.

4. One of the most important things you need to know about the PPPM is this: they are fundamentally dishonest. I know. That's a very strong statement. But here's why I say that.

The PPPM says yes when they mean no, and vice versa.

He tells people what they *want* to hear instead of what they *need* to hear, but then reverses himself in order to please someone else.

She lets people walk all over her, because she doesn't want to ruffle any feathers.

He's the guy who never says "no" and takes on so much that he can't possibly get through it all.

She is secretive, hides her mistakes, and represses her real feelings. The motto is, "If at first you don't succeed, hide the evidence."

People can't trust them, because they won't take a stand for fear of alienating others.

I know at first blush all of this sounds rather bleak and hopeless. But that's not what this talk is about. It's really about creating awareness for how we might be acting, and then set a path for change, growth, and more effective leadership.

Listen, I've walked this path myself. And only by facing my challenges, confronting my long-held beliefs and behaviors, recognizing the impact they were having on my



life and work, and then working my tail off to make the necessary changes have I come to understand that what I once saw as a badge of honor, was instead a symbol of shame.

So why do we do it if it's such a detriment to our own growth? Quite frankly, we don't recognize the impact, because it's how we've always been. For most of us, being a nice guy is something that began when we were young. It was most likely based on our inaccurate interpretations of childhood experiences. And, since patterns like this tend to be unconscious, we rarely evaluate or update them.

But there is certainly hope and the opportunity to change.

One of my all-time favorite Seinfeld episodes was the one where George decides that he's going to change his life by doing everything the opposite of how he would typically behave. In the process, he ends up with a beautiful girlfriend, and lands a job with the New York Yankees. While I don't advocate that exact approach, I do recommend doing some things differently.

Here are some things I recommend to anyone caught up in the Nice Guy Syndrome:

- **Seek to accept yourself just as you are.** Stop trying to be perfect. As simple as it may sound, it can be a very difficult thing to do. So often in life we're told how and where we fall short, and encouraged (or pushed) to be more, do more, achieve more. That can leave us feeling as though we're somehow never good enough. And so we push ourselves harder, demand more from ourselves, and don't ever quite seem to measure up.

What would happen if you were to see yourself as enough? Good enough, successful enough, smart enough, etc. It's a life-changing perspective. And I encourage each of you to try it.

- **Recognize mistakes as nothing more than valuable learning opportunities.** This goes along with the first strategy. When we make mistakes, most of us engage in what I refer to as unhealthy self-talk (and that's an understatement). Driving ourselves to be perfect leaves no room for error, and that is simply not possible.

Failure is always part of the equation. It's not the failure that defines us, but rather how we respond to it. Think about some of your own past failures. Did they define you? Or did you get back up, learn, and move forward? We have a tendency to create so much fear around the idea of failure, but when all is said and done, the actual event is almost never as bad as we had pictured it in our minds.



- **Stop seeking the approval of others.** Okay, the people-pleasing person is wired to seek the approval of others. Hey, I just did this, what do you think of me now? And when we don't get the validation we seek, we resent the other person. Even if they didn't know we were looking for approval. The funny thing is, even when we do get the other person's validation, many times we'll simply discount it, thinking to ourselves, "Yeah, they don't really know me."

When we learn to affirm ourselves we become stronger, more confident, and less in need of external approval. We put ourselves in the driver's seat.

- **Learn to be direct; say what you mean, ask for what you need.** Very few people like it when others communicate indirectly. It smacks of manipulation. By learning to ask for what you need, you take the guesswork out of it for others, and you eliminate your tendency to resent others for not meeting your needs, especially when they had no idea what those are.

This also includes the willingness to set and enforce boundaries. The best part is that people will respect you more for it.

- **Learn to give without expectation.** No strings attached. The nice guy tends to do things for others with the expectation of something in return. The mantra is "Look at all the things I've done for you or this team." And when it's not met with something in return, the nice guy will feel resentful and keep score of all the ways they've been unappreciated.

By focusing instead on what we can contribute, we take the act of giving and make it an unselfish act. We contribute because we want to. It makes us feel better about ourselves and takes the burden off of others for having to acknowledge all we do.

- **Learn to ask for help.** Your ability to ask others for help is one of the best ways to ensure success on your projects. We tend to not ask for help, because it can make us feel vulnerable to others. We don't like to admit when we don't know what to do next. And in the workplace where things can become very competitive, it can strike fear into our hearts because we don't want to look incompetent.

And the most successful people know that no one achieves a high level of success without the help of others. So help your career by learning to ask for help. You'll be glad you did.

If any of this struck a chord with you, then just remember that there is hope. Being a nice guy is not a death sentence. It's a pattern. And any pattern can be changed and we can grow and evolve if we attach enough value to doing so.



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Listen, the bottom line here is that when you are acting as a People-Pleasing Project Manager, you are not the only one who suffers. The team suffers, the organization suffers, and eventually you end up feeling beat up, worn out, and unappreciated.

By working to shift the pattern, you become a more respected leader; you're more open and authentic, definitely more honest with yourself and others, and you finally let go of the unattainable standards that you have set for yourself.

Thank you for your time. I wish you all the best of success!

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