

10-010 – Best practises to enhance Responsible Leadership in the context of Project Management – Buenas prácticas para mejorar el liderazgo responsable en el contexto de la gestión de proyectos

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The RESPRO project (Responsible Leadership - Developing People Skills in Project Management Education in European HEIs) has identified the need to strengthen responsible leadership and well-being soft skills in project management through a study based on focus groups and surveys of higher education students and teachers. The results indicate that, although project managers have mastered the technical tools, interpersonal skills training has a significant gap. Both students and professors pointed to a lack of structured methodologies for teaching responsible leadership and strategies to promote well-being in project environments. The article presents a list of best practices resulting from the study, as well as their relationship to team well-being and job crafting concepts.

Keywords: *Responsible Leadership; Project wellbeing; Management Education; Personal Skills; Interpersonal Skills*

El proyecto RESPRO (Responsible Leadership – Developing People Skills in Project Management Education in European HEIs) ha identificado la necesidad de fortalecer las competencias de liderazgo responsable y bienestar en la gestión de proyectos a partir de un estudio basado en grupos de enfoque y encuestas dirigidas a estudiantes y docentes de educación superior. Los resultados indican que, aunque los gestores de proyectos dominan las herramientas técnicas, existe una brecha significativa en la formación en habilidades interpersonales. Tanto estudiantes como profesores señalaron la falta de metodologías estructuradas para enseñar liderazgo responsable y estrategias para promover el bienestar en entornos de proyectos. En el artículo, se presentan la lista de buenas prácticas como resultado del estudio, así como la relación de éstas con el bienestar del equipo y los conceptos de modelado del trabajo.

Palabras claves: *Liderazgo responsable; Bienestar en proyectos; Educación en gestión; Habilidades personales; Habilidades interpersonales*

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1. Introduction

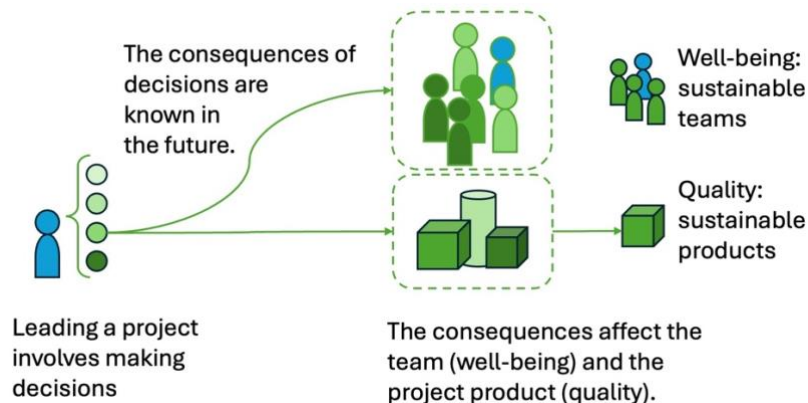
Leadership in project management is a critical factor that significantly influences the success and sustainability of projects. Effective leadership ensures that project goals are met efficiently, transparently, and responsibly, fostering a positive work environment and promoting team well-being. Research highlights that responsible leadership in project management involves ethical decision-making, transparency, and a commitment to team and project success (Brown et al., 2005). Using best practices in leadership enhances job satisfaction and engagement.

Figure 1 illustrates the critical process by which a leader's decisions impact the future functioning and well-being of the team. It begins with the premise that every leader's decision has consequences that unfold over time. These future consequences directly affect the team's operational dynamics and overall health emotionally and professionally. The figure emphasises that the sustainability of the team's well-being can be measured by evaluating the long-term effects of these decisions.

While the general importance of leadership in projects is well-documented, responsible leadership has emerged as one of the areas where the leader leads with a vision of short-, medium-, and long-term consequences. The leader decides towards the most favourable consequences for the project's sustainability.

Research has shown that responsible leadership involves ethical decision-making and transparency, crucial for maintaining a positive team environment and ensuring long-term project success (Clarke, D'Amato, Higgs, & Vahidi, 2020). By visually mapping out this process, Leadership decisions can create a positive or negative ripple effect within the team, highlighting the need for leaders to consider the long-term implications of their actions (Schwalbe, 2009)).

Figure 1: Context of the responsible leadership in the project management framework.



This article is derived from the RESPRO project (Developing People Skills in Project Management Education in European HEIs), whose main objective was to analyse and improve project management skills. To achieve this, qualitative research was conducted through strategically designed focus groups. These groups included the active participation of experienced project managers from higher education institutions in Spain, Finland, Latvia, and Austria. They provided a rich and diverse perspective based on their real-life project management challenges and successes (Guardiani, Favari, & Fierro, 2024). The selection of these professionals as practising project managers, along with the application of the classic

Delphi methodology in the group dynamics, ensured that the conclusions and the resulting list of good practices reflected an informed consensus and conceptual validation grounded in the professionalism and practical experience of those leading projects in the real world (Pretorius, Steyn, & Bond-Barnard, 2018).

Using focus groups is scientifically justified as an exploratory qualitative research method, essential for eliciting collective perceptions and experiences regarding leadership characteristics that foster responsibility and a positive work environment. The qualitative data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis technique, seeking specific recurring themes in the experts' responses to identify a set of best practices. The conclusions of these focus groups in project management pointed to the need to promote efficiency, achieve transparency, offer accountability (oriented toward both the client and the project team), and seek sustainability for the product and the project.

To apply these conclusions to teaching responsible leadership at the university level, it was suggested that students' comprehensive training be encouraged, values and the acquisition of soft skills be strengthened, and commitment to society's objectives be fostered. From this inductive analysis, the set of "Best Practices" emerged, essential for a project leader to create a healthy team environment and enable a suitable work environment. These best practices represent actionable leadership behaviours and attributes that serve as a fundamental framework for fostering responsible leadership in project management, including aspects such as a culture of openness and "Well-Lead".

The study demonstrates how the responsible leadership practices identified influence and facilitate job crafting employees' proactive strategies to modify their jobs, workplaces, and tasks better to fit personal needs and goals. Using rigorous qualitative methodologies such as the classic Delphi technique, thematic analysis in these groups, and the selection of practising project managers ensured an informed consensus and conceptual validation grounded in professional, real-world experience. This explicit and empirically derived connection between a validated set of responsible leadership practices and team well-being, alongside job crafting, presents an alternative perspective in project management literature.

Section 2 outlines the project objectives, focusing on the analysis and enhancement of project management skills. Section 3 details the Methodology, explaining the use of focus groups and the Delphi approach to gather qualitative data from experienced project managers in various European countries. Section 4 presents the Best Practices identified through the research, the list of the best practices obtained, and the relationship between these best practices and the concepts of team well-being and job crafting. Finally, the Conclusions summarise the key findings and contributions of the article.

2. Objectives

The work of this article is part of a project whose main objective is to analyse and improve project management skills. The goal is to identify a set of best practices in project management and explore their relationship with team well-being and job crafting. Ultimately, the article seeks to contribute to project management by identifying and validating essential practices to foster responsible leadership, promoting efficiency, transparency, accountability, and project sustainability. Furthermore, job crafting establishes a link between responsible leadership and team well-being. Figure 2 shows the details of the method used to achieve this objective.

Figure 2: Method used to achieve the aims of the study presented.



Specifically, three objectives are carried out:

- Discover best practices in current project management education was done through surveys of engineering and business higher education institutions in Europe, targeting educators and students.
- Discover best practices of responsible leadership and well-being in project management processes throughout working life was carried out through eight focus groups with professional project managers from different industries within the consortium.
- A synthesis of best practices on well-being and responsible leadership skills in project management was developed. This synthesis is based on the analysis of quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group data.

In summary, the objectives of this article are to identify, analyse, and synthesise best practices in responsible leadership and well-being in project management, both in education and in professional practice, to improve project management skills and understand their relationship with team well-being and job crafting, thus contributing to the advancement of knowledge in project management and promoting more efficient, transparent, responsible, and sustainable work environments.

3. Methodology

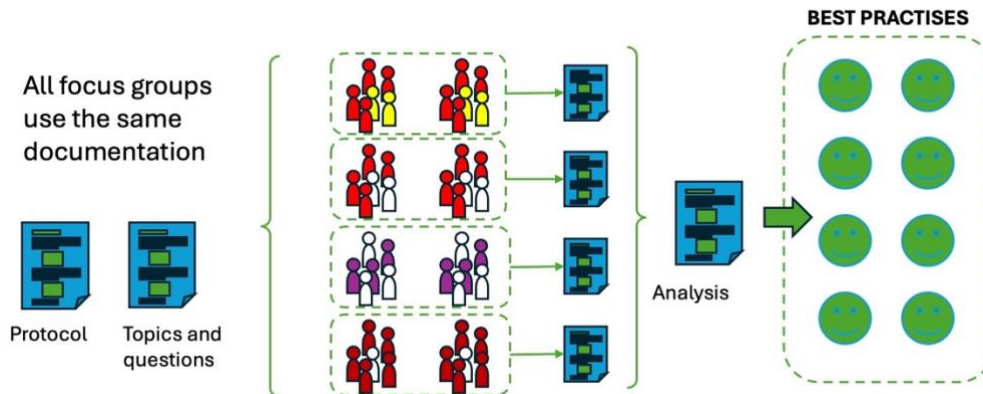
The activities carried out within this methodology to achieve these specific objectives described previously were quantitative research by means of surveys, qualitative research performed using focus groups, and a synthesis of results to create the set of best practices. Quantitative research (Surveys): A survey was designed, piloted, and implemented targeting students and educators of engineering and business higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe. The survey aimed to identify best practices in current project management education regarding people skills, including responsible leadership and well-being. The number of participants was close to 150 students and 50 educators. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using the SPSS program with descriptive and analytical methods. This activity directly contributed to achieving specific objective 1. Qualitative research (Focus Groups): Eight strategically designed focus groups were conducted with the active participation of professional and experienced project managers. The partner institutions convened these professionals (Polytechnic University of Valencia in Spain, Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland,

Riga Technical University in Latvia, and University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt in Austria). The technique used in the groups was a classic Delphi approach, specifically selecting project managers working in companies. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis technique (also mentioned as content analysis), seeking specific recurring themes in the experts' responses to identify a set of best practices. The results obtained from the surveys (quantitative data) and the focus groups (qualitative data) were synthesised to form the basis for the identified best practices and the development of future educational materials. This activity was essential for achieving the specific third objective. This methodological approach involved synthesising information from the professional environment with the needs and perceptions of the academic environment, ensuring that the identified best practices were relevant and applicable to improving university education in project management.

To analyse and enhance project management skills, a series of strategically designed focus groups will be designed with the active participation of experienced project managers. These professionals, convened by higher education institutions, provided a rich and diverse perspective based on their real-life project management challenges and successes within their respective companies and sectors. The professionals were selected considering whether their companies hire internships from universities. Contact was made via email, where it was specified that they were looking for people to coordinate the projects. It is important to note that, in this case, the question was asked whether they followed a predictive or agile methodology, with the former being more common. In the case of the Spanish partner, the companies were closely linked to technology, so agility was more prevalent. The selection of these participants as practising project managers, along with the classic Delphi methodology employed in the groups, ensures that the conclusions, and therefore the resulting list of good practices, reflect an informed consensus and conceptual validation grounded in the professionalism and practical experience of those leading projects in the real world.

The "focus groups" technique is scientifically justified as an exploratory method of qualitative research, fundamental for eliciting collective perceptions and experiences regarding the leadership characteristics that promote responsibility and a positive work environment (Krueger, 2014). The dialectical interaction inherent in group dynamics facilitates the co-construction of meaning and the generation of rich and detailed qualitative data, allowing for a deep understanding of the underlying narratives and values. Its ecological validity lies in the simulation of authentic social interactions, and its potential for methodological triangulation with other approaches strengthens the robustness of the findings. These methodological foundations, supported by specialised literature (Sim, 1998), underpin the relevance of focus groups for investigating complex phenomena such as leadership and organisational climate. Figure 3 shows the details of the methodology used in the qualitative study presented in this article.

Figure 3: Methodology used to obtain the best practices based on the focus groups.



Each group consisted of six to eight people, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Two sessions were held per project partner, with different participants each, resulting in eight focus groups. The same documentation, including a protocol of topics and questions, was used in all groups. A qualitative analysis was then conducted using the thematic analysis technique. Specific themes from the experts' responses were sought, which led to identifying best practices. Following the comparative analysis of the leadership approach, the conclusions included that the development of a responsible leadership model must be based on a set of best practices that a project leader must adopt, creating a positive environment and allowing for flexibility in their team's work.

This paper does not aim to compare predictive and agile methodologies. However, without conducting a study, no significant differences were observed in the observations of good practices between different methodologies.

4. Best Practises

The focus groups' conclusions in project management point to the need to promote efficiency, achieve transparency, provide accountability, focus on both the client and the project team and seek sustainability not only for the product but also for the project.

To teach responsible leadership, the results of the focus groups suggest the following actions to take at university: encourage comprehensive student development, strengthen values and acquire the soft skills that enable them to develop those values, and finally commit to participating in achieving the society's objectives.

These objectives are very general, so to clearly describe what needs to be done and what tools are available, it was helpful to develop a series of best practices, a "wish list" that can then be transformed into specific actions.

4.1 Best practises obtained

Directly emerging from the focus groups' inductively derived conclusions, the RESPRO project further identified a "Best Practises" catalogue deemed essential for a project leader to create a healthy team environment and enable a work well environment. These best practices, representing actionable behaviours and leadership attributes, serve as a foundational framework for fostering responsible leadership in project management. The best practices obtained are listed below, along with their definitions.

- **Team empathy.** Team empathy goes beyond an understanding of individuals to understanding the relationships between team members. The responsible leader knows the consequences of his decisions on the teamwork atmosphere.
- **Holistic Communication.** Transmission is not only of data or information but also of sensations and emotions. Efficient communication must transmit instructions and confidence.
- **Role model.** The responsible leader is a role adopted by the project manager. This role must be demonstrated to the team. Lead by example: The project manager must be a role model for the team.
- **Supportive.** Project leadership is understood as the ability to provide one's resources, usually time, to improve the work and environment of the team.
- **Synergy skilled.** That implies complementing adequately the technical skills with the personal skills. The balance between both types of skills defines the responsible leader who should provide the team with feedback produced with hard (technical) skills and soft (personal) skills.
- **Commitment.** Commitment is the guarantee that generates trust in the leader. Trust is related to certainty in the past (what is said is true) and certainty in the future (what is promised will be accomplished).
- **Culture of openness.** The project leader must be able to generate an open culture. This concept means the team members must have room for manoeuvre regarding their environment, schedules, or workspaces.
- **Well-Lead.** The Wellness leader implies taking care of the team's well-being. This behaviour means that the leader must know what state their team is in, what state it should be in, and take steps to keep it "healthy".

The best practices listed above are not exclusive; any leader can align their most appropriate soft skills with them. The set of "Best Practices," which constitute the main findings of this study phase, was identified and validated through the synthesis of qualitative data from the focus groups and quantitative data from the surveys, as detailed in the methodology section. This catalogue emerges directly from the conclusions inductively derived from the focus groups. The process of transforming the findings into a catalogue of best practices began by refining the definition of each best practice. It was then verified that the best practice met the following characteristics:

- **Understandable.** Leaders understand what good practice entails.
- **Convenient.** The result of good practice can benefit the team's well-being.
- **Deployable.** The leader has the resources and the organisation have also the resources to carry out the good practice; this is where "job-crafting" appears.
- **Verifiable.** It can be verified that the team has improved, and progress has been made efficiently.

Finally, the name of the best practice was selected from among the experts and professors participating in the focus groups.

4.2 Relation with team well-being and job crafting

Best practices themselves are a list of the characteristics a person must have to lead a team responsibly. Responsibility implies achieving well-being through job crafting. To link the above concepts, we have sought to identify the actions of each good practice that can be taken to achieve the well-being of the work team. These actions must allow for employee freedom, which has been structured into job-crafting concepts. The relationship between all the elements is shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Authors by Continent for the Period 2000-2005

Best Practise	Team well-being action	Job-Crafting concept
Team empathy	Fostering a supportive environment, and considering the needs of team members,	Relational crafting, Cognitive crafting
Holistic Communication	Considering also emotions and sensations fosters an environment of understanding and connection among team members.	Approach/Avoidance crafting
Role model	The project leader attitude must be model. The impact of a positive role model is the fostering of an environment of trust, respect, and motivation.	Resource crafting
Supportive	Making members feel valued, heard, and empowered to do their jobs effectively.	Task crafting, Collaborative crafting
Synergy skilled	Creating an environment where both technical knowledge and interpersonal skills are valued and developed.	Approach/ Avoidance crafting
Commitment	Establishing a context of trust and security. When team members trust that their leader will keep their promises and act with integrity, uncertainty is reduced, and an environment of stability and psychological safety is achieved.	Proactive commitment crafting
Culture of openness	Fostering an environment where team members are empowered to change their environment, schedules, and workspaces, creating a sense of autonomy, trust, and respect for individual needs.	Relational crafting, Resource crafting, Task crafting, Collaborative crafting
Well-Lead	Check what your equipment is in and what it should be in and take steps to keep it "healthy."	All previous job crafting concepts

Considering the importance of every “Best Practice” to contribute to the team well-being, job crafting concept can be used are in the corresponding column of the Table 1. To understand the relationship between good practices, the concepts of job crafting are presented below.

- Relational crafting: Team members can modify the nature of their interactions at work, choosing how and to what extent they approach colleagues or engage in group social activities.
- Cognitive crafting, which involves changing perceptions about work to give it more meaning, can lead to greater job satisfaction and a shared sense of purpose within the team.
- Approach/Avoidance crafting: Actions to gain positive aspects of work and actions to avoid negative aspects. These actions focus on seeking work challenges that allow them to develop new skills and knowledge.
- Resource crafting: Team members actively seek resources that improve their well-being and team dynamics. Since the leader encourages autonomy and considers the team's needs, individuals might request more flexibility in their schedules or workspaces, contributing to their well-being.
- Task crafting: This involves changing the type, scope, sequence, and number of tasks that make up their work. Employees might propose redistributing tasks to balance the workload, taking on responsibilities that allow them to develop new skills, or even automating specific tasks to reduce pressure and improve the work environment.

- Collaborative crafting. Feeling safe and supported by the project leader, team members work together to identify and change their roles and the overall team structure.
- Proactive commitment crafting. Refers to the actions team members take proactively to align their commitments and efforts with team and project objectives, relying on the consistency and reliability of the leadership that will support them.

As presented, each Best Practice outlines desirable behaviours in project leadership and suggests specific actions a leader can take to positively impact their team's well-being. In turn, it has been shown how these environments of responsible leadership and concern for team well-being open the door to various forms of job crafting, allowing employees to adapt their roles, relationships, and perceptions of their work to improve their well-being and contribute to the team.

This trilateral relationship underscores the importance of proactive leadership that is mindful of team well-being in fostering an environment where job crafting can flourish as a valuable tool for improving job satisfaction, engagement, and, ultimately, the sustainability of both the team and the project, thus paving the way for the study's overall conclusions.

5. Discussion

The results of the RESPRO project have identified a set of essential best practices for responsible project leadership. These include team empathy, holistic communication, being a role model, supportiveness, synergy skills, commitment, a culture of openness, and leadership involved in team well-being.

The results point to the need to promote efficiency, transparency, and accountability (oriented toward both the client and the project team) and seek sustainability for the product and the project. Comparing these findings with existing literature helps place the results within the current body of knowledge and highlights their practical relevance. Particularly relevant are the practices focused on the team, such as empathy, communication, and active leader support. These elements strongly resonate with the literature on workplace well-being, emphasising leadership support's importance in fostering a positive work environment. The RESPRO project explicitly explored the relationship between identified best practices and team well-being. Our results reinforce this direct connection within the project domain, demonstrating how specific leader actions, such as ensuring the team's well-being referred to as "Well-Lead" or "Healthy Leadership", contribute to "team sustainability" through a healthy work environment.

Finally, the project has identified a key relationship between these responsible leadership best practices, team well-being, and the concept of job crafting. Job crafting is an individually driven work design process where employees proactively change job characteristics to better align their work with personal needs, goals, and skills. This term was initially devised by (Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001) and results are aligned with validated scales (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). Our findings suggest that the supportive and open environment created by a responsible leader—a culture of openness is an identified best practice—facilitates this process, enabling the team to improve their well-being and contribute more effectively. This trilateral relationship between responsible leadership, team well-being, and job crafting, validated by the experience of professional project managers consulted in the focus groups, represents a significant contribution of the study to understanding how leadership can empower employee agencies to achieve project sustainability and success comprehensively.

6. Conclusions

The RESPRO project has significantly contributed to project management by identifying and validating a set of best practices essential for fostering responsible leadership. Through the strategic use of focus groups and the Delphi methodology, the project has provided a comprehensive understanding of the leadership characteristics that promote efficiency, transparency, accountability, and sustainability in project management.

The qualitative research has highlighted the importance of team empathy, holistic communication, role modelling, supportiveness, synergy skills, commitment, a culture of openness, and wellness leadership. These best practices represent actionable behaviours and attributes crucial for creating a healthy team environment and enabling a positive work atmosphere.

The study's conclusions are based primarily on qualitative data obtained from focus groups, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the sample size and diversity of participants may not fully represent the broader population of project managers. It would be valuable to conduct a quantitative validation of the identified best practices through surveys of a broader and more diverse sample of project managers. This aspect would confirm the generalizability of the findings and a more precise establishment of the strength of the relationship between best practices, team well-being, and job crafting.

Furthermore, the development and evaluation of specific training programs to enhance responsible leadership and job crafting skills, based on the conclusions of this study, is presented as a promising avenue for translating knowledge into practice.

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Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

All work (focus groups, etc.) done by the authors in the context of the project has been made only with humans; no AI was used in these tasks. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been used during research, AI-powered tools were used to locate and synthesise information from a vast array of bibliographic sources, helping to identify key papers and relevant data (AI 30%). In the writing process, AI offered support in refining language, using the sequence (1) human writing (2) AI results (3) human rewriting; the AI results provide alternative phrasing and ensure clarity and coherence in the exposition of complex ideas, the percentage of final text changed by AI suggestions was estimated in 25%.

Communication aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals



Regarding SDG 4, the article contributes by emphasising the importance of developing project management skills through responsible leadership practices. The article highlights the need for comprehensive education that includes technical and soft skills by identifying best practices and linking them to team well-being and job crafting. This approach ensures that students are proficient in project management and prepared to contribute positively to society, promoting inclusive and equitable quality education and fostering lifelong learning opportunities.

Concerning SDG 8, the article is aligned because it emphasises the importance of responsible leadership in project management, which fosters a positive work environment and promotes team well-being. The article creates workplaces that support decent work conditions by identifying best practices that enhance efficiency, transparency, and sustainability. This approach improves job satisfaction and engagement and drives economic growth by ensuring that projects are managed effectively and sustainably, thereby supporting productive employment and fostering economic resilience.