

Recipe for success: selecting the right project manager at Front Door Foods

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ABSTRACT

This is the third in a series of cases about Front Door Foods (FDF), a privately-owned company specializing in digital food ordering and delivering restaurant-prepared meals. In this installment, FDF's Chief Operating Officer (COO), Grace, is trying to determine who will be her project manager for the upcoming delivery-time remediation project. Through a series of personality assessments, Grace can better understand what qualities a successful and desirable project manager and team member will have.

The case provides the students with an introduction and explanation of several foundational personality assessments as well as FDF's roster of potential project managers. Not only will students gain an understanding of how the personality assessments work and the difference between hard and soft skills in project management, but they will also be able to exercise their comprehension with a group of candidates within the case. Inspired by the real-world problem organizations face regularly—selecting project managers and dealing with the consequences of that choice—this case study provides a relatable and engaging topic for students to learn about their own personality and leadership styles. In turn, these revelations should spark introspective and challenging dialogue in the classroom or discussion board.

Keywords: project charter, project management, project manager selection, project manager, case study

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Case series statement

This case is “Part 3” of a series of cases dealing with Front Door Foods. Please see: Part 1, “Disappointment at your door: the case of an underperforming food delivery service” as published in *Journal of Business Cases and Applications*, vol. 39, 2023; and part 2, “Chartering a timely path - from door to door” as published in *Journal of Business Cases and Applications*, vol. 42, 2024 for complete background information.

BRIEF HISTORY

In existence since 2015, Front Door Foods (FDF) is a privately-owned, American company specializing in restaurant-prepared, on-line-food-ordering and home-delivery business. The company is based in Nashville, TN. This centralized location is ideal for controlled geographic expansion through franchising which they have been doing since 2019. Having grown quickly, presently they have 78 locations in large and medium-sized cities in 10 states. The gross revenue in 2022 was \$351 million dollars (US).

MOTTO

“Our front door to your front door in 30 minutes or less.”

BUSINESS MODEL

The FDF business model operates by receiving orders on their FDF application platform and communicating directly with any one of their more than 21,000 partner restaurants across the southeastern United States. Once the order is received by FDF, the pertinent restaurant is contacted electronically or via voice to place orders for the FDF patron. FDF promises to deliver the meal within 30 minutes of pickup from the restaurant. All orders coming into FDF are assigned a seven-digit numerical tracking number. After the order is placed with the restaurant, the location’s customer service member texts the FDF customer informing them of the approximate time for home or office delivery based on the restaurant's capacity and road conditions (traffic, weather, etc.). The FDF system also generates a text message to the driver with addresses for both the pickup restaurant and the home or office delivery. This text serves as a timestamp of when the order was placed at the restaurant. Much like a commercial mail or package driver, when the food is picked up from the restaurant, the driver keys “pick-up” on their FDF cellphone application, timestamping when FDF is in the custody of the ordered meal. Again, like a commercial driver, the driver keys “delivered” upon delivery of the meal to the desired location. This serves as a timestamp that concludes the service for the FDF patron. Additionally, a five-item customer satisfaction survey is sent immediately after the driver keys “delivered” on their FDF app.

WHO ARE THE PLAYERS?

Here are the six characters in this case:

1. Grace – Grace is the COO for FDF. She has a background in logistics and supply chain management and is responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the company, relations with restaurants, and new and existing location operational readiness. Grace is also responsible for developing and implementing new operational strategies to streamline the company's processes and improve overall efficiency to maximize customer satisfaction. She has been with FDF for eight months.
2. Bruce - Bruce is the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) for FDF. Bruce has a degree in computer science and has logged years of experience in software development. He oversees the development and implementation of the company's technology systems. Bruce works closely with the marketing and operations teams to ensure that the company's website, ordering platform, and mobile app are user-friendly and offer customers a seamless ordering experience. He has been with FDF for six years.
3. Richard - Richard is the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) for FDF. With years of experience in finance and accounting, he is responsible for managing the company's finances and developing financial strategies to ensure the company's long-term financial stability. Richard is skilled at analyzing financial data and using it to make informed decisions about pricing, product offerings, and other key business decisions. He works closely with the other executives to ensure that the company's financial goals align with its overall strategic objectives. He has been with FDF for six years.
4. Elizabeth – Elizabeth is the Data Analytics Manager for FDF. Her role is to uncover operational and consumer trends through data capture at the organizational, divisional, state and city level. She reports to Grace and has been with FDF for 4 years.
5. Kevin – Kevin is the Operations Improvement Manager. His role is to look for opportunities to improve customer experience as well as reduce operational expenses or improve quality. His focus is on the restaurant clients as well as end-use customers. He reports to Grace and has been with FDF for 5 years.
6. Dr. Thomas Foster – Dr. Foster is an academic in the school of business at the Stratham College in upstate New York. Grace was in several of Dr. Foster's classes including supply chain management, operations management, and project management. Initially reconnected through LinkedIn, Grace has exchanged emails with Dr. Foster on an infrequent basis as a member of the college's advisory committee, and recently asked Dr. Foster for advice about chartering potential projects at FDF.

THE PROBLEM

FDF has decided to resolve the food delivery time problem by adopting project management techniques and subsequently produced a draft project charter (please see Part 2, Chartering a Timely Path - From Door to Door for more details about the project charter; Yang et al., 2024). The next natural decision point after the charter was written and the project had been selected was “*who is going to lead this project?*” Grace once again decided to reach out to her former professor, Dr. Thomas Foster, who had provided invaluable assistance in framing the

initial draft of the project charter. Grace believed that once the project manager was selected, they could review the draft and make adjustments, thereby producing the final charter for FDF's use. In addition, the newly selected project manager will start thinking about project stakeholders and communication planning.

THE PHONE CALL

Grace: "Dr. Foster...this is Grace again from Front Door Foods. I hope you're doing well. I'm afraid I'll need to get some additional counsel from you. We've constructed a draft project charter like you said, and now we're in need of a project manager. Can you offer any guidance on what the selection process would look like if we wanted to use someone 'in-house' rather than a consultant?"

Dr. Foster: "Hello Grace. Nice to hear from you too. I'm glad the chartering process went well, and you've started the project process. In terms of project managers, many organizations drop the ball here. They select project managers who happen to have "time-capacity" at that moment, have adequate subject matter expertise in the area, are the first to volunteer for the assignment, or simply are in the boss's office when the conversation for a project manager ensues! There are many reasons why people are chosen to lead projects and not all of them are well thought out."

Grace: "Oh good grief! I thought this was going to be easy."

Dr. Foster: "Well, it's not as easy as you might think. Projects can be long and tiresome. They can be tedious and detailed oriented. They involve team leadership and are very likely to involve organizational politics as well. A good project manager has to know when to push and when to relax with their team. They have to have their eye on the ball to ensure success. They also have to be a bit of a coach and motivational leader at times. Running a successful project is not all tools and techniques...or what we call the "hard skills". Often the competencies that rise to the top of importance for project success are the *soft skills*...those oriented around personality and the ability to communicate and relate to others. Tell you what, I'm going to send you a few research papers I'm aware of that discuss this with an email note giving some additional insight."

Grace – "Oh that would be great. I appreciate it so much."

Dr. Foster: "Take a look at these papers and consider my note and if you have any questions, please call back...I'm happy to help. Take care and don't work too much!"

Grace: "I'll do my best! I definitely owe you lunch. Thank you so much."

THE EMAIL

Here is the text of Dr. Foster's email:

Grace –

Research has shown us there are certain personality traits typically associated with a successful project manager. In fact, entire personality assessment tools have been developed around these traits. You will see them referenced in the attached articles. I wouldn't advise basing your entire decision off these assessments, but they will certainly get you closer to the ideal project manager. Remember, a good project manager has to

“get along” with the necessary stakeholders and team players. You’d be surprised how much ‘social capital’ a project manager can spend when dealing with stressful projects. Besides a certain personality, it is essential the potential project manager understands the process or problem that the project is going to address. If they know nothing about it, they’ll have a learning curve to scale. It’s very important they have the right mix of soft and hard skills.

Cheers,
Dr. F

Dr. Foster’s email had five articles attached. They were:

1. How personality traits and dimensions of project managers can conceptually affect project success (Creasy & Anantatmula, 2013)
2. PROMETHEE-based ranking of project managers based on the five personality traits (Aretoulis et al., 2019)
3. What are the characteristics that software development project team members associate with a good project manager? (Medina & Francis, 2015)
4. Soft skills of construction project management professionals and project success factors (Zuo et al., 2018)
5. The impact of manager’s personality traits on project success through affective professional commitment: The moderating role of organizational project management maturity system (Ameer et al., 2021)

GRACE’S NOTES

With that, Grace read the articles Dr. Foster provided and determined there are certain personality traits and dimensions of a project manager that were probably important to the success of the FDF project. She made some notes to herself about the six personality assessments and inventories from Dr. Foster’s email attachments:

1. Communication apprehension – level of apprehension or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated verbal communication with another person (team member) or persons (group meeting; McCroskey, 1977). High levels (7-9) of this could hamper a project manager. Low levels (1-4) are desired due to personal interactions and multiple conversations/team meetings.
2. Innovativeness – willingness to innovate or develop something new in a project/process (Stock & Zacharis, 2011). High levels (7-9) of innovativeness in a project manager can lead to a team innovation orientation and a belief that the team can overcome obstacles or challenges. Low levels (1-3) of innovativeness can hamper organizational growth and suboptimize a project’s potential. Higher levels are preferred.
3. Self-monitoring – very similar to self-awareness is primarily interested in public appearance (Scott et al., 2012). Those with high self-monitoring (7-9) are very concerned about other’s perceptions of them and can become like a chameleon when pressed. This

trait can lead to high turnover due to internal stress. Those with low self-monitoring (1-3) can be a bit cavalier or off-putting in their dealings with others. This too is probably not a good trait as team collaboration on projects is required. The ideal score is probably between 4 to 6.

4. Conflict management – there are always conflicts in a project – some greater than others, requires a conflict management style (Robbins, 1974; 1979). Conflicts can be personal or professional when opinions/viewpoints differ. The conflict management style employed by project managers will typically manifest in one of three forms:
 - a. “accommodating” – these managers decide to “get along” with others which can lead to weakened project deliverables.
 - b. “collaborating” – these managers seek out a “win/win” in their interactions and are concerned with the long-term relationships between team members and stakeholders.
 - c. “competitive” – these managers typically maneuver for a “win/lose” scenario in which they win and others lose. This style is not conducive to long-term morale or team strength.

Among these three forms, the accommodating style is preferred over the others when conflict occurs.

5. Initiating Change – the desire and ability to change or lead change within a project or organization if necessary for the good of both (Kanter, 1983). High levels (7-9) indicate a readiness to lead change or even look for opportunities for change to push the project (perhaps the organization) forward. Low levels (1-3) may demonstrate a desire for the status quo or unlikeliness to challenge pre-conceived ideas/notions and could be detrimental to a project.
6. Big-5 Personality – developed over the 20th century, the Five Factor Model consists of five traits:
 - a. “Adjustment” – this measure focuses on levels of confidence and emotional stability. High levels (7-9) are preferred as project managers need confidence when leading change, suggesting alternatives for managing conflict.
 - b. “Surgency” – this measure indicates to what degree extraversion and/or dominance are exhibited; it also measures task orientation. Moderate to high levels (5-8) of this trait are preferred. Very high levels could lead to project team cohesion issues and/or a domineering project manager.
 - c. “Openness to Experience” – this measure examines creativity, willingness to consider new ideas and being flexible. This measure at moderate levels (4-6) are preferred. Higher levels could potentially lead to expanding project scope unnecessarily or distract the team when someone wants to go down a “rabbit-hole”.
 - d. “Agreeableness” – this is a general measure of the ability to socialize, engage in social behaviors, and having emotional intelligence; high levels (7-9) are preferred. This dimension is positively associated with high team morale.

- e. “Conscientiousness” - this measure examines dependability, integrity, and goal-directed behaviors. High levels in this dimension (7-9) are ideal for a project manager’s schedule deadlines.

ASSESSING THE CANDIDATES

Grace administered the above assessments to nine of her colleagues whom she believed could be successful in the project manager role. Each had varying degrees of subject matter expertise and strength of relationships with the various stakeholders at FDF and its franchisees. Therefore, it was going to be difficult to determine any clear project manager selection based on technical acumen or knowledge of the project alone. As such, these assessments were viewed as deferential in helping her make the final decision. The table, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix), displays the candidate’s assessed scores.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why might high levels of communication apprehension and low levels of “agreeableness” be a problem for a project manager?
2. Please explain the similarities between “change orientation”, “innovativeness” and the Big-5’s “open to experience.” How might these be helpful to a project manager?
3. Based on the scores in the table, which person represented in the table would you choose to lead the project? Why?
4. Based on your answer to Question 3 and the scores in the table, which candidate would you choose to be your backup project manager? Why?
5. Based on the scores in the table, which candidate would you *least* likely choose for the project manager role? Why?

TEACHING NOTES

Introduction

Projects rely on the involvement of individuals, underscoring the significance of understanding the interpersonal dynamics within a project, particularly when appointing a project manager. The individuals contributing to a project subtly shape the outcome of its deliverables and influence how the project’s implementation adds value to the organization, and no one on the team has more influence in those outcomes than the project manager. But people are individuals, with distinct personalities, and often, innate skills. This case introduces the reader to assessments of personality and skill sets. Students should realize that project managers should not be “selected” based on these personality assessments alone; technical acumen, project knowledge, stakeholder relationships, and organizational skill are also important considerations.

Student Outcomes and Proposed Use

This is the third case study in a series of cases about Front Door Foods (FDF). As stated in the first case study by Shick, Johnson, Creasy, and Fan (2023), “the goal of this series of cases is

to help the student think about the application of project management principles to graspable, real-world scenarios.”

The goal of this case is to help the reader identify the qualities of a successful project manager or team member. In other words, the reader is introduced to the "soft skills" of project management. These skills are likely much harder to obtain, hone and craft than "hard skills" like project charters, work-breakdown structures, risk analyses and earned value calculations. The biggest challenge project managers face typically does not deal with technical abilities, but rather with their ability to lead people, "read the room", facilitate a process, or deal with conflict.

Given the project manager selection scenario faced by FDF, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge by meeting the desired student academic learning outcomes:

1. Emphasize the value of soft skills in the project management context.
2. Evaluate their own personality traits in order to understand their own personal management style.
3. Analyze a list of potential project managers and make recommendations on their appropriateness to fill that leadership role.

Course and Audience

This case is appropriate for use with management and project management students in both upper level undergraduate and graduate programs of study. Student analysis of the case can be presented as written answers to discussion questions in a face-to-face (F2F) or virtual setting. The instructor may choose to lead a F2F or virtual class discussion using the discussion questions. Students may also be assigned discussion questions either individually or in a group setting to work on during a F2F class period or as a homework assignment.

Students in management courses may use the case to springboard into other management discussions or assignments such as budgeting, finance, or strategic planning. Project management students may use this case to springboard into other discussions or assignments pertaining to leadership, project team cohesiveness, professional one-on-one relationships, etc.

Student interest and applicability should be high with this case as FDF is modeled after popular food delivery services that are highly utilized by students. The concepts and problems surrounding FDF are both approachable and relatable and should make discussing the case with students easy and straightforward.

Sample Answers to Discussion Questions

1. Why might high levels of communication apprehension and low levels of “agreeableness” be a problem for a project manager?
Communication apprehension can lead to serious issues when working with individual team members in a face-to-face manner, working with team members in a group setting, and presenting project status or outcomes to various stakeholders. Agreeableness is required when navigating the political landscape prevalent in most every organization. It is also necessary when dealing with individuals who are notoriously “hard to work with”. However, high levels of agreeableness could jeopardize the project’s goals, scope or budget (as it could lead to “people pleasing”) and therefore a moderate level is preferred.

2. Please explain the similarities between “change orientation”, “innovativeness” and the Big-5’s “open to experience”. How might these be helpful to a project manager?
Change orientation, innovativeness and open to experience are all indicative of a flexible mindset and willingness to ask, “Why not?” frequently. Innovation involves creating an original product or process or revising a current one. Change orientation is an openness to new ideas and/or new ways of doing things. Openness to experience is probably a precursor to the other two because without that dimension, the other two are very unlikely. This openness to all things in a project (scope, schedule, team members, stakeholder management, etc.) is very important to project managers in an era of rapid change and agility.
3. Based on the scores in the table, which person represented in the table would you choose to lead the project? Why?
Based on the table of assessments, the person most likely to be selected is Taelor. She has a low communication apprehension (3); rates high (7) on innovativeness; rates moderately (6) in self-monitoring – not callous not over self-managing; has a collaborating style of conflict management; rates moderately-high (7) in change orientation, Big 5 – Adjustment, and Big 5-Surgency; a desirable moderate level of openness to change and higher levels of agreeableness (7) and conscientiousness (8) which bodes well for future team mates of Debbie and project outcomes.
4. Based on your answer to Question 3 and the scores in the table, which candidate would you choose to be your backup project manager? Why?
As it pertains to a back-up manager in the event Taelor is not available, the person most likely to experience success based on the table is Michael. He has low communication apprehension (2) which should aid him in all project manager communication roles; scores high (8) in innovativeness and is a moderate self-monitor with a score of 6; he utilizes collaboration most predominantly when dealing with conflict; score high (8) on change orientation and Big-5 Adjustment (7) giving him confidence when tackling a tough assignment; he scored high (8) on surgency which is on the top end of the scale and indicates strong task orientation but could sacrifice relationships along the project plan; he scored a 5 on openness to change – which is a moderate level preventing unnecessary changes, but open to change possibilities; he scored (8) on agreeableness which could be taken as people pleasing if he over indulges in that dimension; lastly he scored a 9 on conscientiousness which means he will definitely get the job done and will focus intently until it is completed.
5. Based on the scores in the table, which candidate would you *least* likely choose for the project manager role? Why?
The person least like to succeed is David. He has high (8) communication apprehension thus limited himself in person-person/group team communication necessities; he scores low (3) on innovativeness which means he will more than likely not challenge the status quo and a (2) on self-monitoring which could mean he can be a bit cavalier in his dealings with project team members and/or project stakeholders. His conflict management style is “win-lose” oriented with his competitive style; his change orientation is low (2) which again means he will shy away from recommending or advocating for any necessary changes the project might require for success; with a low score of 3 in Big 5 Adjustment, his confidence and emotional stability might be insufficient for a difficult project such as this; his low score (2) on Big 5 Surgency means

his task orientation might suffer with project deadlines; low score on openness to change also indicates a lack of appetite to pursue opportunities for improvement; his low score (4) of agreeableness could mean a demoralized team upon completion and his Big 5 conscientiousness low score (4) could mean the project isn't completed or is completed on time.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Assessing the candidates

	Comm Appr	Innov -ation	Self- Mon	Conflict Mgt	Initiate Change	Big 5 Adjust	Big 5 Surg	Big 5 Open	Big 5 Agree	Big 5 Consc.
Names										
Annabelle	5	6	3	Accom	4	4	5	7	6	6
Pam	7	3	7	Accom	6	6	4	7	7	6
Jack	3	9	8	Collab	5	5	9	3	4	4
Michael	2	8	6	Collab	8	7	8	5	8	9
Tom	6	4	3	Comp	3	3	3	6	7	7
Roman	7	5	7	Accom	5	4	4	8	3	2
Taelor	3	7	6	Collab	7	7	7	4	7	8
Laurie	5	5	8	Collab	6	5	6	6	6	4
David	8	3	2	Comp	2	3	2	3	4	4

