PROJECT MANAGERS COACH THEIR TEAMS IN PERFORMANCE AND CHANGEABILITY

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Abstract

A modern project manager is a coach who supports the team to maintain changeability and the team's competence potential. An agile manager interacts closely with both the team and customers and invests in customer understanding. His/her emphasis is on inclusion, inspiration, openness, and appreciation of feedback. A solution-focused project manager also fails fast and learns quickly and takes advantage of all the new knowledge in project management. A project manager has strong resilience and ability to change.

Laurea University of Applied Sciences (LUAS) has a project learning model, called Peer to Peer (P2P), where students train their project management skills by leading teams in real working life business projects. The goal of the P2P is to provide the students with an authentic learning environment to practice modern project management. The student teams consist of groups of students where one works as a student project manager. The project teams are coached by senior lecturers. The working life partner's role is to assign the project, co-create the project and give feedback. The student project managers are supported by various courses and personal coaching.

The theoretical background of this article consists of coaching and solution-focused, changeability, resilience and co-developing with the team. Earlier studies of the P2P model show that working as a student project manager improves many traditional and modern project management skills such as communication and negotiation skills, creativity, problem solving and teamwork and leadership skills.

This article describes the significance of the lecturer's guidance in supporting student project managers. The lecturers support the student managers by coaching courses for student project managers and they also participate in project manager discussions. Additionally, the lecturers coach the project teams, including the student project manager, in weekly project coaching sessions.

This article also examines how project management skills develop when students study project management in the P2P projects. The development of the project management skills was studied in the autumn in 2021. The target group of the study were student project managers who managed P2P projects (15 ECTS) assigned by the working life partners. The main research question of this study was: "What kind of project management skills do the students learn when they work as student project managers in the P2P projects?" The research utilised an electronic survey targeted for student project managers working in the P2P projects. Responses were received from 37 student project managers.

The main result of the study shows that student managers' competencies and skills were strengthened in areas such as delegating skills, managing entities and customer relations. According to the results, the lecturers' guidance was useful and essential for the student project managers. It can be concluded that the practical way of learning project management increased the students' interest in applying for project management positions in the future. The results of the study will provide knowledge of how LUAS could develop project manager education in the future.

Keywords: project manager, project learning, coaching, solution focus, changeability, resilience.

1 INTRODUCTION

The work of a traditional project manager has been to lead a project team, to be responsible for the implementation of a project in accordance with the assignment. The project manager has been responsible for project management including planning, organization, progress, monitoring and reporting [1]. The professional skills requirements of project managers have increased as working life expectations and project management have become more agile and faster. It is no longer possible to manage and control all things. The core of the project manager's work has shifted from influencing individuals to fostering the potential and ability within the team [2, 3].

This article describes how business management students at Laurea University of Applied Sciences (LUAS) can strengthen their modern and agile project management skills in a real working life project. The article also explores how lecturers can support the development of students' skills as project managers.

1.1 Coaching project management is based on trust, communication and sparring

Many of the traditional responsibilities of project management are still essential cornerstones of a successful project. The role of the manager includes taking overall responsibility for project management, communication, budgeting and team leading [1]. However, the modern project manager invests especially in creating motivation within the team, encouraging and motivating team members to find answers to promote their own activities using coaching leadership [2].

Coaching emphasizes purposefulness, valuing the skills of team members, an inclusive co-development, and avoiding direct advice or instructions. Coaching leadership is based on trust. The new role of the project manager is therefore to support the members of the team in their work so that everyone's best abilities come to the fore and are freed up for the use of the team. In return, the potential of the team supports the success of the whole [2, 3, 4].

The coaching project manager does not primarily determine the policies, goals or solutions of the team but seeks to support the team's own insight and finding solutions through appreciative interaction. The coach listens, asks questions, is present, encourages and gives feedback. She/he uses coaching management tools such as SMART (Smart, Measurable, Achievable and Relevant) or GROW (Goal, Reality, Option and Will), asks insightful questions and provides systematic feedback. The key goal of coaching is to strengthen the team's internal motivation, ability, self-confidence, enthusiasm, and insights [2, 4].

Coaching project management is also essential to ensure the project manager's own resilience and to allocate resources to the management of the entity and the customer interface [4]. Many benefits can be achieved through team involvement and accountability. Basically, people take pride in the work they do and commit to the goals they set together as they gain responsibility and influence. A good leader is present, listening and sparring the team. When he or she is easily approachable and open to discussion, team members also have natural opportunities to discuss project assignments and the challenges that may be associated with them. This interaction gives the project manager a better view of how the project is progressing as well as opportunities to provide feedback [1, 5].

1.2 Solution-focused Project Manager and Team Fail Fast, Fail Well and Learn

"Fail fast, fail well, learn" is an approach that is especially popular in agile project management methods, in which a team can boldly experiment and test, gather feedback, and decide whether to proceed or end an experiment without delay, and to continue to overcome failures as quickly as possible and take advantage of new knowledge and insight that emerges from failure. Failures are viewed as learning experiences and experimenters are not blamed [6].

Therefore, a solution-focused project manager quickly guides his/her team from failure again to the future and provides the tools to continue development work. The problem or difficulty encountered is not underestimated but is turned into a goal. It is important to create a culture in the team in which, instead of focusing on problems, solutions are sought. Solution-focused working culture utilizing the insights gained from previous success experiences. Three solution-focused guidelines can be summed up: "Don't fix what isn't broken," "Do more of what works," "Make a small change to what doesn't work" [7].

Solution-oriented thinking emphasizes the view that people have the resources to bring about changes that are important to them. This same idea can be used for the whole project team, directing the group's attention to past successes, progress, progress towards a common goal. In the role of the manager, it is essential to take into account even small successes, to encourage the team and give positive feedback. In setting a common goal, an equal discussion is essential, in which the views expressed by the various members of the team are valued and respected. The project manager can show appreciation by first listening to the team's views or experiences before sharing their own thoughts [7].

Especially in an international work community, it is important to respect different ways of thinking. A positive attitude and listening often creates a positive and safe atmosphere of conversation, making it easier to come up with creativity and new ideas. There are likely to be many alternative solutions to the problems. The most important tools for leading the conversation are to ask the right kinds of questions. The basis for solution-oriented questions are open-ended questions such as when, where, and how? [7].

The listener should also ask more specific or concise questions to check that he or she has really understood the speaker correctly. In this case, you can ask to clarify the message. A question that maps the goal such as, "How can the goal state be described?" often contributes to the debate. A solution focused leader also asks questions about a positive exception or survival example such as, "What kind of action has helped in the past" or "how have you coped with similar situations so far?" [7].

Sometimes it is good to accept progress through small steps. The main thing is that the direction is in line with the set goal. Purposefulness is not given up, but the team is trusted to do its best, and to achieve what is possible right now. The solution focused mindset can be summed up in the form of what you would like to achieve, not by considering what you would not like [7].

1.3   Changeability - Flexibly over Challenges

Projects rarely go according to plan and there are things what are not always predictable and solvable. The work of a project manager periodically involves stress, a heavy workload, as well as challenging and surprising situations. The leader must have a strong belief in the ability that new routes, goals and resources can always be found to secure the progress of the project. This mental capacity, which enables a person to utilize their resources and maintain their ability to function and well-being in changing situations, is called resilience. The importance of mental resilience is emphasized in surprising and difficult situations when familiar patterns and plans do not materialize. A person with strong resilience withstands adversity and can recover from stressful situations without exhaustion or discouragement [8, 9].

Resilience is not an innate trait but arises from a person's ability to identify and utilize a variety of internal and external resources. Resilience can be consciously developed. Positive past experiences of coping with adversity support development. Positive experiences of how to cope with past adversities and resources are also of great importance in this development process. The factors that helped maintain functioning, well-being, and a positive perception in a previously challenging situation often provide the keys to a solution [8, 9].

However, resilience is not a permanent feature. One key factor in the development of resilience is the interaction between the individual and the environment. Individual create an idea of themselves in relation to other people. Understanding this fact is also important for the project manager to ensure the resilience of the different members of the team. It is important to create a secure project work environment that supports the individual's own tendencies to face and overcome disappointments. The worst thing is to leave a team member alone in difficult situations [8, 9].

1.4   A Project Manager Delegates with Skill and Uses the Expertise of the Entire Team

One of the main tasks of a leader is to utilize the potential competence of the entire team. Team members should also be aware of each other's skills and usability. A good team shares information, has a peer discussion, and takes advantage of swarm intelligence. Skilfully instructed and systematically delegated tasks also make it possible to limit the workload of the manager. When a task is given, all the necessary information should be given to the person in charge to ensure the smooth running of the work. The schedule must be realistic and correct. The division of labour should be fair among team members. It is important that the new task does not complicate the performance and commitment of the person in charge of the task already given [1].

A project manager must be able to stay away from the task he or she is delegating and trust the members of his or her team. However, it is important that a list of delegated matters and agreed timetables is kept. The leader also monitors the completion of agreed tasks and gives praise and positive feedback about a successful job. Feedback and, if possible, a tangible or intangible award for good work will motivate the team to do their best in the future as well [1].

1.5   The Top Team Co-develop and Appreciate Colleagues

A team is the most important resource in a project, whose performance, enthusiasm, and commitment to the work will determine the outcome of the project. The project manager needs emotional intelligence and coaching skills to understand how the interactions between team members, different work styles, and group dynamics work best. The coaching management approach is about a clear common goal, which is based on the mutual solidarity of the team members. The team leader activates this co-development process through open discussion, enabling an ordered feedback culture and work

environment. In a well-working team, its members can dream and pursue boldly agreed goals, try, test, and fail [2, 5].

The team's internal work motivation is created not only by good leadership but also by having the opportunity to influence one's own job description. Team members appreciate the feedback, sharing ideas and open discussion. Work is lightened with humour and successes are celebrated. Enthusiasm arises from mutual appreciation and participation. Coaching project managers set an example through their own actions, shows their own enthusiasm and are ready to stretch and support the team. A strong team spirit also supports the project in difficult times. A resilient and solution-focused team views adversity as a normal project phase and learning experience. The project manager takes responsibility and protects the team from burdens that do not belong to them. A top team stands together on the agreed issues and pursues the agreed goals effectively [2, 5].

1.6 Coaching and Guidance of Student Project Managers in Real Working Life Business Projects

Laurea University of Applied Sciences' development-based pedagogical learning model (LbD) strengthens the skills needed in working life. In the LbD model, students are coached and guided to embark on genuine working life development projects in their studies. Working life projects are integrated into course-based studies from the beginning. In goal-oriented and guided project work, many of the skills needed in working life are developed. The student utilizes theory to develop in practical working life, while strengthening solution-centricity, critical thinking, and self-direction. LbD-based learning requires the student to be active, committed and to build and share expertise in teams. Close co-operation in working life strengthens the student's professional networking as part of their studies, provides an insight into the skills required in working life and enables a smooth transition to working life [10]. The project learning "Peer to Peer" (P2P) model is one form of learning by developing in the Business Management Degree programme. In the P2P students learn in authentic working life projects and learn how to solve real company problems in the projects. Typical P2P project topics include sales, marketing, service design and human resource management. [11].

This study examined the development of the competence of student project managers studying project management in P2P projects. The guidance and support processes of the student project managers was also examined. These support processes are project manager discussion and optional project manager coaching course. Sparring is a two-way conversation between the teacher and the master student leading the project, where the main goal is to provide tools to guide the team towards a successful outcome [12].

Included in the studies is also the Project Manager Coaching Course which covers the most important contents of project management and leadership work. The contact teaching for the coaching aspect combines the teaching of theory and practical exercises. Practical exercises include feedback and interaction exercises and the use of facilitation tools. Between face-to-face teaching, students apply and test methods for leading their own team. The key themes include agile project management methods, coaching management, solution-oriented thinking, effective communication, customer and financial management, and facilitation. In addition to project manager coaching, each student works as a project manager and seven-person team leader for one semester and develops genuine assignments from a working life partner. Examples of these include various marketing campaigns, measures to strengthen the image of an employer, market research and various processes that develop a business or entrepreneurship [12].

Student project managers and the P2P team are also coached in regular weekly meetings with the lecturer who is supervising the team. There are also private meetings, called "Project Manager Discussions (PM Discussion)" between the student project managers (SPMs) and lecturer in order to support the SPM's management and leadership work. There is a minimum of one PM discussion during the project. In the discussion there are typically topics such as project management successes, challenges, team leadership, project progress and keeping the project on the track. The students and lecturers may also discuss confidentially concerns.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study was implemented during the autumn in 2021. The target group of the study were 40 student project managers who were managing P2P projects. Two methods were used: a thematic analysis and a quantitative electronic survey.

The student project managers answered the electronic survey by email. Additionally Microsoft Teams chat messages were used for collecting the data. The survey was open between 29.11.-10.12.2021. At the beginning of the electronic survey background questions were asked (study time, experience of project management at work). In the second part of the survey 12 questions were presented which described project management. The questions were presented as in the following example. "Evaluate how your skills have been strengthened in the following project management topics as you worked as project manager". The respondents could provide their opinions on the topics using a five-step scale (Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree). The students also had the possibility to comment on the project manager work in an open question. From the SPMs were also asked about the challenges when working as a project management in the P2P project. Additionally, there were questions concerning the usefulness of Project Manager Coaching course and Project Manager Discussion.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The Fields which Demonstrated Strengthened Student Project Manager Skills

The respondents were asked to assess how their competence had been strengthened in the following subject areas when working as a project manager. According to Figure 1, the respondents estimated that they had developed the most in areas such as delegating skills, project management skills generally, customer relations and in managing entities. The students estimated that they had developed the least in facilitation skills and financial management. According to the respondents, sales skills had not been developed either.
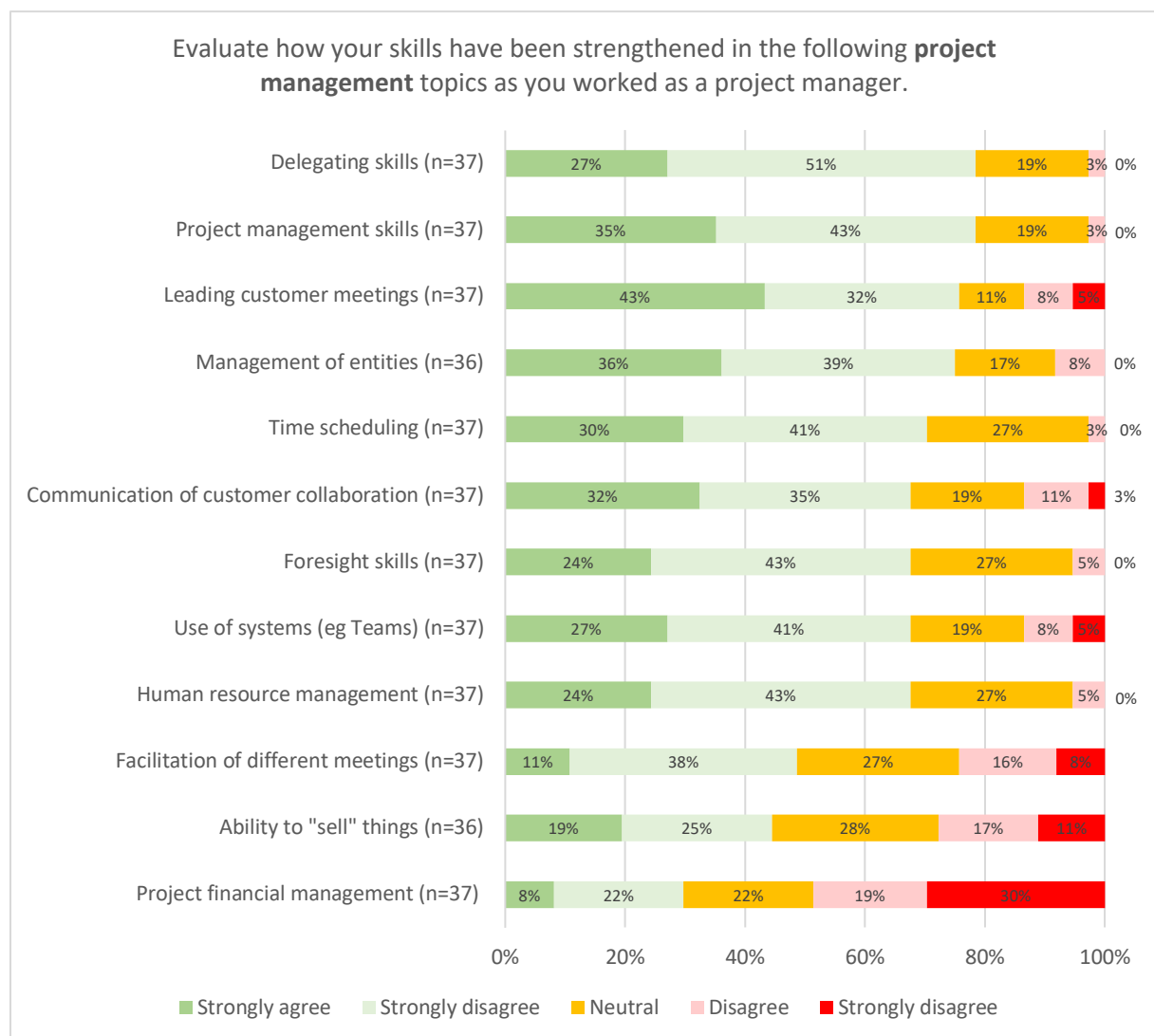

Figure 1. Student project managers' self-evaluation of their project management skills.

The respondents were then asked to name any other possible project management skills that had been strengthened during their time as a project manager. Nine SPMs (n=20) mentioned self-management as a skill which had improved. Three of the SPMs felt that their communication skills had developed when working as an SPM. One of the students noted:

> *Learning about yourself and your own knowledge has been the biggest benefit of working as a project manager because you can already guess your own reactions to changing situations. In addition, being able to honestly admit to yourself what things are difficult to manage in general. (student)*

Secondly, they were asked what issues had challenged the respondents in project management. Eight respondents (n=24) mentioned the different levels of motivation as the most challenging thing. "Other difficulties in team interaction" was mentioned by six SPMs. Scheduling the project and managing in situations of change were perceived as challenging aspects of the role of the student project manager (n=24). Communication, delegation and a balanced share of tasks also challenged the student project managers according to the answers. This was explained by the students as the following quotations show:

> *"Scheduling, changing schedules, communication between the project team".*

> *"The internal motivation of the team, some of the team members were really cheerful and motivated to do extra, while some of them, to put it bluntly, didn't do it, etc.".*

3.2 Usefulness of the Project Manager Discussion and the Coaching Course

The P2P approach has systematically developed coaching and other support systems to strengthen the development of the student project managers in the demanding role of team leader. These forms of coaching and support were rated by the students (n=32) as very useful, quite useful, just a little useful or not useful at all. Figure 2 shows that in general the Project Manager Coaching Course was found to be more useful than the project manager discussions among the students who had participated in both.
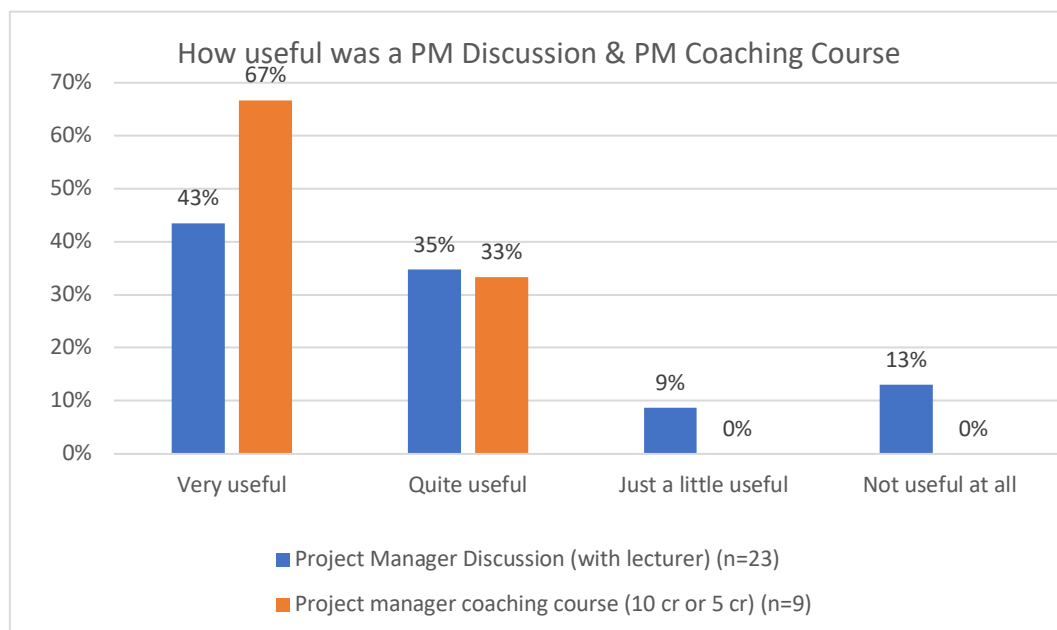

Figure 2. Usefulness of the project manager discussion and the coaching course.

As development proposals, it is proposed that the project manager's discussion should be arranged at least twice during the project. The content of the discussion should also be developed to provide support for project management and scheduling. The following themes were highlighted in the open feedback:

> *"More sparring would be needed to schedule tasks when developing a project plan".*

> *"The discussion in the middle of the project is too late".*

> *"If possible, the discussion should be held maybe twice: at the beginning to make sure that the project manager understands what the project's goals are and how they could be pursued".*

The key development feedback concerning the project manager coaching focused even more on enabling peer support. It was hoped that the training would provide space for joint discussion moments where the project manager students could share their experiences with others in the same situation. It was also hoped that the training would take place entirely in contact teaching, this feedback should be implemented if the Covid-19 situation allows it. The open answers also highlighted the need to modify the content of the coaching so that various project management tools could be reviewed at the beginning to support practical management work. The following quotations from the respondents illustrate these sentiments:

> "I was working as a project manager on my first project, so the need for support was great, because everything was still really new."

> "I have just started my studies and project study and work is completely new to me. I have never worked in a supervisory position. I would have liked guidance on what exactly belongs to the project manager."

> "Even more opportunities to meet and speak with other project managers, peer support."

> "If only all appointments were available on campus (i.e. no remote appointments), then the course would be perfect."

> "The course was very helpful, and I learned a lot of new things. Campus days and workshops were the highlight, while remote meetings were a little stiffer (as you might expect). Very good course, 5/5 I would recommend to others."

> "The project manager training was very useful and comprehensive. I learned a lot of new things that I will be able to take advantage of in the future. Coaching allows you to realize what could be done even better as a project manager or where you could act differently. I suggest to everyone."

Next, it was studied how working as a project manager affected the students' future career prospects. It was positive that the management experience had aroused interest in continuing to work as a leader and project manager, which can be seen in Figure 3. The following quote represents the students' views in general concerning their interest in working in the field of project management in the future after working as a project manager:

> "It was an interesting experience and awesome to challenge myself. I did not consider myself suitable for any role as a leader or project manager, but interest arose with the project".
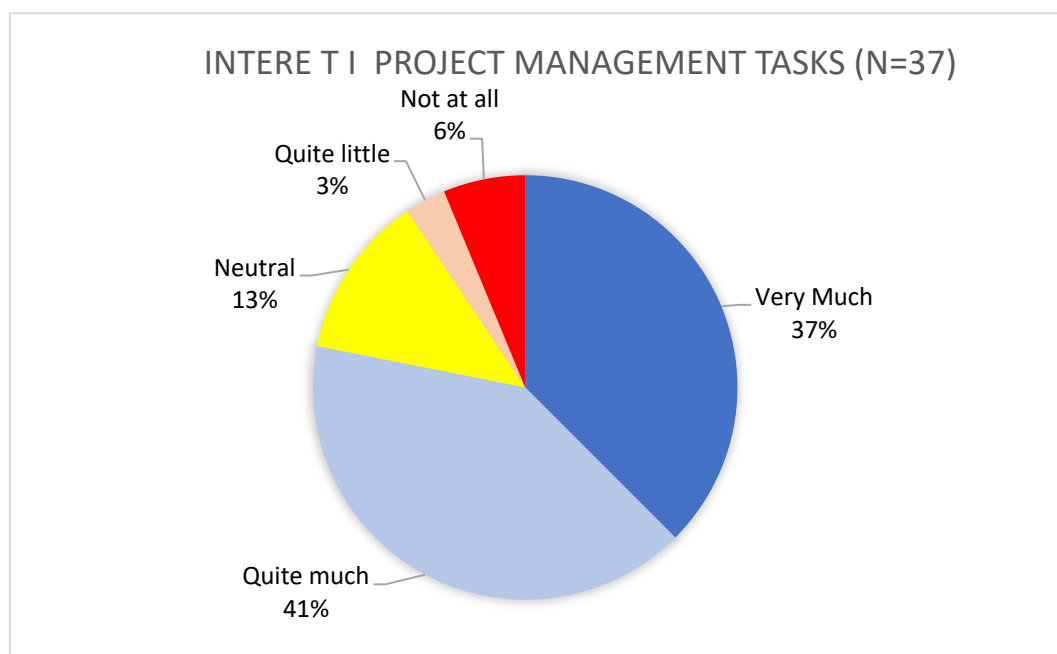

Figure 3. How project management work influenced the students' future career vision.

4   CONCLUSIONS

The main result of the study shows that the student managers' competences and skills were strengthened on a large scale when they worked as student project managers in the P2P projects. Many of these skills are important competencies for project managers such as delegating skills, managing entities, customer relations and the ability to change. However, developing as a project manager is an ongoing process continuing after graduation. Work life experience brings additional insight to many essential managerial skills. The most important thing for students is to have a positive attitude and the courage to trust themselves and their skills. This practical experience as a project manager seems to have strong added value in the P2P model compared to pure theory teaching.

According to the results, the lecturers' guidance and coaching were also seen as an important part of the development as a project manager. However, the students needed more concrete feedback to develop their own activities. The students also made it clear that they appreciate face-to-face guidance more than distance learning. Project manager coaching was introduced as a compulsory part of project management studies. The first time as a project manager and team leader can be a challenging experience for anyone. In general, the presence, listening, and discussion of a lecturer is important so that the first-time as a project manager is a more positive than discouraging experience. Lecturers should also take responsibility for the learning challenges of individual members of the student team in situations that are more serious than normal and require professional intervention.

It can be concluded that the practical way of learning project management increases the student's ability and interest in future working life as a leader and project manager. Working as a student project manager provides concrete insight for the students in practical project management work. A considerable portion of the students (80%) saw the job of project manager as one potential career option in their future working life.

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