Multitasking in Project Management

– when you have to fly, navigate and communicate

By **Mads Cronquist** · Cronquist Consult ApS

The project manager has to keep progress going, stay on top of budget and risks, talk to the customer, brief the executive team and hold the team together at the same time. In everyday language, we call it multitasking.

But multitasking is really a myth. People cannot solve several demanding tasks at the same time – we just switch focus quickly. The skilled project manager does it with structure, prioritisation and training, and that is why it looks calm from the outside.

This article is about how multitasking becomes leadership – and why it is a competence that must be trained across the whole organisation.

Aviate – Navigate – Communicate

In aviation, pilots work by a simple but unshakeable principle: Aviate – Navigate – Communicate. First you fly the aircraft, then you navigate, and only then do you communicate. The order is not random. It ensures that the most important thing always comes first when a lot is happening at once – and if things are about to go wrong.

As a pilot, I regularly scan the instruments for heading, altitude and speed, monitor the weather, adjust the engine, coordinate with the controller in the tower and brief the passengers. Although it is complex, it happens calmly and in a controlled way. Beneath the surface, it is an orchestrated discipline – and exactly the same discipline that project management requires.

> *Multitasking without structure is chaos. Multitasking with structure is leadership.*

Fly the aircraft – progress and overview

The project manager's primary task is to take the project safely from A to B: Progress, milestones and deliverables. You need to know the goal and direction (the strategy), the cruising altitude (the level of ambition) and the fuel load (the resources). But while you hold the course, all sorts of things happen around you: Resources are moved, assumptions change, stakeholders make new demands, and the market moves.

That is why the skilled project manager does not just stare at the Gantt chart. Just as the pilot continuously scans the instruments, the project manager scans budget, risks, resource load and the team's well-being. Multitasking here is the ability to switch focus quickly without losing context – being able to talk to the customer while making a mental note that the schedule is slipping by two weeks and requires other measures.

Navigate – zoom in and out

Pilots fly according to a flight plan with fixed waypoints and always have an alternate airport (or, strictly speaking, an alternative course of action) ready. In projects, navigation corresponds to strategic alignment: How does the project support the company's overall strategy? What do we do if the assumptions change? And where is our alternate airport if the plan has to be adjusted?

The project manager must be able to discuss details in a workshop at 10 o'clock and talk to the executive team about the project's strategic impact at 11. These are not two different competences. It is like the camera on your mobile phone: It can zoom both in and out – but not at the same time. As a project manager, however, you must be equally good at both.

That is the project manager's multitasking competence in a nutshell: The ability to deliberately place your leadership in the right place at the right time. It takes a good deal of training.

Communicate – with the tower, the crew and the passengers

The tower (or, strictly speaking, Air Traffic Control – ATC) corresponds to the project's external stakeholders: Customers, suppliers, authorities, the board and partners. You can be the world's best at managing internal processes, but if you do not communicate clearly with ATC, misunderstandings, delays and perhaps even the risk of dangerous situations arise. It requires being able to shift perspective, translate complexity into clear communication, align expectations and negotiate changes – without losing direction.

The crew is the project team, where employees often have several roles at once: Professional specialist, process coordinator, customer contact and internal change agent. Multitasking is therefore not only about the project manager's own capacity, but also about coordinating other people's simultaneous roles with clear role allocation, clear decision paths and a shared understanding of the situation.

The passengers are the rest of the organisation. When the pilot says: "We are experiencing a little turbulence. Please fasten your seatbelts", it does not change the weather – but it changes the passengers' experience. When the project hits delays, shifting priorities or budget pressure, transparent communication is crucial. The project manager must be both analyst and storyteller.

Around the clock – bridge renovation at Christiansen & Essenbæk

One of the most demanding examples of multitasking in project management I have been part of was at Christiansen & Essenbæk (C&E). The leadership team dared to experiment with an entirely new way of renovating bridges – around the clock. We started with a strategy seminar and intensive but very down-to-earth leadership training.

The 24/7 concept placed entirely new demands on the project managers and foremen: Shift teams had to be planned and coordinated, materials and machinery had to be ready at the right times, and road users, authorities and neighbours had to be kept informed continuously. Progress, safety, quality and communication had to be handled at the same time – also in the middle of the night.

The result spoke for itself: Daytime queuing for road users was cut by 80%. It succeeded because there was structure, clear roles and leaders who were trained to keep the overview under pressure. That is Cronquist Consult ApS's speciality: Building bridges between the organisational and the business side.

Training in decisions under pressure

At the demolition and construction company Tscherning, we built Tscherning Academy with hands-on tracks in instruction technique, communication and collaboration, and team leadership – each with two days of intensive training for foremen and crew supervisors. The project managers also had a development programme with increasing complexity and training in the ability to keep a cool head when the pressure rises, and finally the tracks were merged.

At C&E, over the years we expanded the competence development activities considerably and also trained under the OLTC programme "Leadership and Decisions under Pressure" on several intensive 3–4-day expeditions with special forces instructors, both in Denmark and abroad.

Here the project managers were trained to lead, prioritise and make decisions when several things happened at once and time was very short – using a special methodology that ensures execution.

That is exactly what multitasking in project management requires: Drive, personal leadership and the ability to execute when the situation demands it.

Together with Christiansen & Essenbæk, Tscherning also took part in the development project BygOp!, where competence development was organised across the companies, and where together we created entirely new training programmes and learning platforms.

When turbulence hits

The real test comes when something goes wrong: A delivery fails, a key employee leaves, or the assumptions change from one day to the next. This is where the difference between busyness and professional multitasking shows.

Pilots train emergencies again and again. Project managers should do the same, for example through our OLTC High Performance Team Leadership, scenario planning and After Action Reviews, where the team asks after each milestone: What was supposed to happen? What happened? Why? And what will we do differently next time? Multitasking under pressure requires preparation before the pressure arises.

The mature organisation understands that multitasking is not an individual superpower, but a system competence. It requires competence development in project management, training in communication, investment in team development and clear strategic prioritisation. Because without prioritisation, multitasking is just overload.

How multitasking becomes leadership

Five levers for the project manager:

- **Prioritise like the pilot:** Manage the project and ensure its sustainability (lift and progress), orient the direction and communicate – especially when things get hectic.
- **Scan the whole:** Keep an eye on budget, risks, resources and well-being – not just the schedule.
- **Build structure:** Standardised processes, clear decision models and visualisation of progress free up capacity.
- **Communicate in layers:** The tower/ATC, the crew and the passengers need different messages.
- **Train for the unexpected:** Scenario planning and After Action Reviews, *before* the pressure arises.

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Do our project managers have the structure and decision paths needed to handle the complexity?
- How often do we train project teams to handle the unexpected – and do we learn systematically from every project?
- Do we prioritise clearly enough, or are we really asking project managers to multitask their way through overload?

Conclusion – calm on the outside, discipline on the inside

Multitasking in project management is not about doing more. It is about being able to shift perspective without losing direction, coordinate people without creating confusion, balance details and the whole, navigate between strategy and operations – and create calm in the midst of complexity.

It looks calm from the outside, but it is the result of discipline, training and deliberate structure. The difference between stress and professional multitasking rarely lies in the number of tasks. It is the training in handling complex circumstances that determines whether the landing is soft or fatal.

The article builds on, among others, my LinkedIn article "Multitasking i projektledelse" (Multitasking in Project Management, 2026) and the Tscherning and Christiansen & Essenbæk cases on cronquist.dk.

Do your project managers need training in keeping the overview under pressure?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps project managers, leadership teams and teams with structure, communication and decisions under pressure – with your own projects as the training ground. Read more here:
Leadership development · Strategy and execution · OLTC programmes