

## Project Management Myths

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The field of project management is as old as the universe since the world was, in effect, a project. However, the formal study of the area is relatively new. Nevertheless, there is already in the field a significant number of certain beliefs that *appear* to be based on truths. Many of these empirically unevaluated principles have become accepted as general guidelines. These have been repeated enough they have come to be accepted as fact. That assignment of veracity may not be able to stand the heat of examination. The point of this paper is to engage in a review of whether there is evidence to support some of the popular knowledge in the field and examine some of what turns out to be myths of project management.

1. Myth: The result of negotiations should be win-win.

Reality: In the "best off all possible worlds" this would be a laudable objective. In fact, the best result that a project manager (PM) can usually expect is win more - win less. Many people go into a negotiation with the idea of getting what they want for the lowest cost, that is, to get more than they give up. The agency to which the negotiator must report back will often make a judgement of the success of the negotiation based on the income/outgo ratio. For example there will be a computation as to whether the PM gained more in terms of dollars or schedule or quality than was surrendered. The agency is not likely to care if the other side left happy and satisfied but the negotiator will be criticized if there is not something akin to victory for their side. A negotiation is an exchange process. Exchange processes are essentially zero sum games. That means that for someone to come out ahead, someone else must come out behind.

2. Myth: The key to a successful project is management.

Reality: Common sense makes it appear that it is quality management that determines the outcome of a project. Yes, it is important to manage properly but true success comes from project *marketing*. The allocation of resources (management) is secondary to finding out what the stakeholders want and then presenting the completed project to them in a way that shows their needs have been met (marketing). Within the area of marketing, promotion is the activity which is most important. Promotion is communication with the intent to persuade. According to the Project Management Institute, project managers spend the majority of their time communicating. For a message to be delivered effectively a project manager must: (a) have an objective; (b) understand the audience and its intent; (c) deliver the message in such a way as to inspire confidence; and (d) match the desired result with the actual. All of this is marketing. And it is marketing which determines whether the project is judged to be successful by the stakeholders.

3. Myth: Project managers need to think "outside the box." That is, throw off traditional constraints to thinking, redefine the situation and come up with creative alternatives. The goal is to expand horizons and come up with new ways of doing things.

Reality: The trouble is that in most cases the size of the box is fixed. For nearly every PM there are the intractable four sides of the box composed of the limits established by: (a) government or industry regulations; (b) ethics; (c) laws; and (d) corporate culture. For example, an ISO standard is set so a project's means and results must stay within it. In today's atmosphere of "doing more with less" while satisfying more and more regulations there is less and less space "outside the box" and the increased costs of failure make the box less and less permeable to creative solutions. It may seem that since we must (or should) all work within regulations, ethics and laws that the side of the box easiest to penetrate is corporate culture. In fact, it is the most rigid. PMs constantly hear, "We've never done it that way before" and "That's not the way we do things around here." Senior management discourages what it claims it desires.

4. Myth: By focusing on a project problem, the solution will be found.

Reality: If the focus is on the problem then all thinking will be devoted to studying the symptoms. Instead, project managers should devote themselves to the solution. And, after understanding what the problem is, ignore it. For example, there is the Pothole Principle. If a driver spots a pothole ahead and continues to look at it (the problem), the driver will hit it. That is because our hands follow our eyes. Expert drivers know to look to either side of the road (the solution) in order to avoid contact. They plan their route around the diversion and keep their focus on the desired result. And another example: during World War II bombardiers needed the wings level during the last five minutes of the bombing run in order to aim properly. At that time the anti-aircraft fire was most intense and puffs of smoke would be all around the plane. Even though it would have been natural to react to the diversion, successful pilots ignored the flak - to be able to hit the target. Project managers deal with distracting "flak" all the time. The emphasis should not be on what went wrong, or the petty nuisances along the way, but rather on how to make things right.

5. Myth: A problem is an opportunity.

Reality: Although this sounds good, in everyday activity, many problems really are problems and have nothing to do with opportunity. For example:

- Your best employee's spouse gets an outstanding job offer in another country.
- Your organization's new chief financial officer thinks projects are a waste of money.
- A new local union leader has been elected after promising that things in your project were going to change.

Those are not opportunities; those are problems - real problems. As are many other "opportunities" project managers face.

6. Myth: An increase in project management office morale will lead to higher productivity.

Reality: High morale people are happy workers; they are not necessarily better workers. There are some people who are both productive and miserable. At the same time there are some

people who love where they work but don't get anything done. To increase productivity the project manager must discover what is retarding it now and then take appropriate action. It takes much more than a quarterly picnic and a holiday bonus to reach into the souls of people. On the other hand, one can make an employee joyful but that may not translate into improved performance on the job. Just because a person's attitude may be influenced that does not mean it will lead to a change in behavior. Besides, there is nothing that raises morale like success and success comes from capability and achievement - not contentment. High productivity leads to hitting the project's milestones as planned - which then turns into high morale.

7. Myth: There is no such thing as a stupid question.

Reality: Someone who never witnessed a senior management review session while questioning a project manager's progress must have started this. Some of the questions we have heard asked of a PM include:

- Were you planning to put a roof on the building?
- What color envelope were you going to use to send the questionnaire?
- Do the hands on the watch move clockwise?

8. Myth: A project manager should do what s/he knows is right.

Reality: Being right is not as important as appearing right. For example, most experts agree that the next century begins 1 January 2001. On the other hand, the general public believes the date was 1 January 2000. If a PM was supposed to have the project done in time for the millennium then by October 2000 there would still be a few months to go before the deadline. But since most people thought the scheduled date had passed they would believe the project to be behind schedule. Therefore while the PM was technically right, s/he was judged wrong. So project managers sometimes have to be incorrect in order to seem to be correct. Be aware that to a significant extent, "perception is reality" so when dealing with people who believe the earth is flat, one needs to be able to address what will happen to the project when it gets too near the edge of the earth and in danger of falling off.

Summary: The point of this paper has been to stimulate discussion of commonly held but, we believe, incorrectly accepted beliefs. Our field of project management is too new, and our work too difficult, to be burdened by the baggage of false assumptions.