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## The Easier Way

**D**uring a coffee break at a business conference a few years ago, I fell into conversation with the executive vice president of a Fortune 100 company.

After a moment or two he read the company name on my name tag.

“So you help companies achieve success with their projects. That’s a tall order,” he said. “Who’ve you worked with?”

I mentioned some of the technology companies, manufacturers, and producers of various types of services with whom we had been engaged. I explained how we increasingly found ourselves helping organizations execute complex projects with project teams whose members live and work in countries all over the world, speak different native languages, and have very different cultural backgrounds.

“Projects are always challenging,” he said. “Right now we’ve got several in process: We’re relocating one of our key facilities overseas, we’re implementing an enterprise-wide

logistics management system, and we're in the middle of a strategic new product development. They're all running far behind schedule and way over our cost estimates. Frankly, I'm not confident that I'll be happy with the results of any of them, no matter how long they take or how much they cost."

## Why *Do* Projects Fail?

Why indeed! I'd say most executives, project managers, and members of thousands of project teams around the globe have asked themselves that question many times.

My 20-plus years' experience as an engineer, a project manager, and a project management trainer and consultant have shown me that there are a few basic reasons why projects so often fail.

### **Projects Are Fundamentally Different from Processes.**

Companies serve customers, generate revenue, and manage resources through *processes*—for marketing and sales, manufacturing and service delivery, distribution, administration, etc.

Processes are systematic and repeatable. That's where much of their power comes from. Managers and operating personnel master their organizational processes, so that the processes become highly effective and routine.

On the other hand, companies build competitive advantage by creating strategic change through the execution of *projects*. Projects aren't like processes. Projects are not routine, and they usually involve far more uncertainty. You can't manage projects in the same way you manage the routine, ongoing processes of the organization. By their very nature, projects pose a wide range of special challenges.

## **People Fail to Recognize the Special Challenges Involved in Managing Projects.**

I believe that projects are more challenging than processes. They have special types of problems, and managing them effectively requires a special set of skills.

First, unlike ongoing processes, projects are supposed to have a beginning, middle, *and an end*. Typically, they must be completed by a certain date, and often project deadlines are extremely tight.

Second, projects may (and often do) involve a high degree of uncertainty about the specific work activities required, work methods, available resources, the durations of activities and their costs.

Projects often involve complex sequencing relationships among the activities. In other words, some activities cannot begin until certain other activities have been finished. Analyzing these sequencing relationships, especially for a large and complex project, can be extremely challenging.

Large projects may actually be a nested pyramid of projects within projects. So a given project may actually be a sub-project or a sub-sub-project within a larger initiative.

Projects frequently involve highly variable workloads for people and other resources. However, those resources typically have constant capacity, at least in the short run. This often leads to unanticipated overloads for individual resources.

Project teams differ from operational teams, too. Project teams are temporary and often extremely diverse. Team members may have different educational and professional backgrounds, use different jargon, and approach problems in different ways. They may even have different personal or organizational objectives.

In addition, project team members may be dispersed across the globe, making collaboration and coordination difficult. They may also be separated by language and cultural barriers.

Unlike in other areas of the business where lines of authority are clearly defined, the project manager may lack formal authority in relation to team members. It isn't uncommon for some team members to outrank the project manager in the organizational hierarchy.

Finally, because projects are non-routine by definition, they tend to invite changing priorities, miscommunication, confusion, frustration, and possible conflict within the project team.

### **Good Project Management Often Conflicts with Basic Human Nature.**

Some of the most important disciplines and behaviors required for effective project management are contrary to fundamental aspects of human nature.

We all tend to procrastinate to some degree. We tend to underestimate challenges that we perceive as being comfortably in the future. On the other hand, many of us overreact to problems immediately in front of us. As stated in a basic principle of time management, we confuse the "urgent" with the "important." We waste time on the former and put off dealing with the latter.

As you'll see later, when we discuss "Shifting the Worry Curve<sup>SM</sup>," rather than fighting human nature, The Project Success Method recognizes the realities of human nature and uses them to make project management easier and more effective.

### **People Tend to Overestimate Their Project Management Qualifications.**

People who believe they are world-class project managers far outnumber those who really are. Many people think project management is "just common sense," and they fail to recognize the specialized skills and processes required to manage projects successfully.

### Case Study: The Midas Touch Financial Group

The Midas Touch Financial Group, a mid-sized firm with offices in seven cities in the United States and Canada, is about to move its headquarters to leased space in a new building. Chief Operating Officer, Pat Crandall calls Office Manager, Chris Toliver into his office one morning.

“Chris, you know we’re going to move the office soon,” Crandall said as he seated himself behind his desk. “I’ve been thinking a lot about this move and how complex it is. With the corporate offices, the data center, and the customer service center moving, it’s got the potential to be extremely disruptive to our operations.”

“Every functional department in the organization will be involved and affected, and I want to make sure that we pull this off with the minimum possible disruption. To do that, I want to treat this move as a formal project, which means I need a strong project manager,” Crandall said.

Toliver nodded. “You’re right, Pat. I’ve been thinking about it, too. We need a solid plan and tight execution.”

“Chris, I know you’ve only been with us for a few months, but I’ve been impressed with your planning and organizational skills. I know you’ve already got a full plate, but would you be willing and able to take on the job of managing this project? Obviously, it’s a very high-profile job. It would give you a great opportunity to stand out, if you can manage the move successfully.”

“Thank you, Pat. I appreciate your confidence in me,” Toliver replied. “Yes, I’d like to take on the responsibility. I’m confident I can handle it.”

“Great! Thanks for stepping up to the plate on this. By the way, have you had much experience managing projects?” asked Crandall.

\* This case is fictitious. Any similarity to actual, existing companies, individuals, or projects is purely coincidental.

*(continued)*

Again, Toliver nodded. “Yes, I’ve managed several projects during my career. Of course, they weren’t as large as this one. They involved just me and one or two other people. But as I see it, project management is mainly common sense. It’s not rocket science.”

“I agree; it’s not rocket science. But have you had any training in project management?” asked Crandall.

“Several years ago I took a one-day project management class offered by the local chapter of the American Association of Program and Project Managers,” said Toliver. “It covered things like bar chart schedules and something called earned value analysis.”

He paused. “I think I still have the notebook from that class somewhere in my files. I still haven’t unpacked everything from my move from San Francisco. I’ll see if I can put my hands on it tonight.”

“I’ve also played around a little with the Project Pilot software we’ve got on our server. That may be useful. I think I saw a tutorial on it somewhere,” Toliver added. “Don’t worry, Pat. I can handle this project. The move will go like clockwork.”

Crandall stood up. “Thanks Chris, I appreciate your willingness to take on the extra work, and I’m happy to see you’re confident,” he said, shaking Toliver’s hand. “That’s one less thing for me to worry about. And don’t you worry. I’ll be here to support you any way I can.”

### Questions

1. Based on this conversation, how confident are you about Chris Toliver’s qualifications to manage this project? What led you to this conclusion?
2. What additional questions should Pat Crandall have asked to understand Toliver’s qualifications?

I've seen it many times. Just as Chris does in the case study above, people frequently overestimate their own ability to manage projects for a wide variety of reasons.

- People don't know what they don't know. They don't realize that proven management processes exist for defining, planning, and controlling projects. If they aren't aware of these management processes, they can't be aware of their own deficiencies in project management know-how. Agreed, successful project management isn't rocket science. But you do need the specific knowledge of these project management processes as well as the skills and tools necessary to apply them effectively.
- Many of the short courses in project management among the plethora offered by colleges, training firms, and professional associations are a mile wide and an inch deep. These courses give participants a false sense of expertise.

*In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.*

—Yogi Berra

The courses typically introduce students to a broad array of project management techniques, but they don't explain how these techniques fit into the processes that are used to define, plan, and control projects. They don't explain the importance of each technique in those processes. They seldom provide practice in developing the analytical skills students need to apply the techniques correctly, nor do they warn students of the potential errors and pitfalls of each technique. Students are left with superficial knowledge of many techniques and little understanding of why, when, and how to use them. Too often the instructors who teach these short courses have little significant experience managing real business projects. Their material may be out of date or of

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little practical value. As a result, students still “don’t know what they don’t know,” when they complete the course. Unfortunately, many of the instructors don’t know either.

- People tend to equate superficial knowledge of project management software with in-depth knowledge of project management itself. Tiger Woods probably uses the best golf clubs money can buy, but his clubs don’t make him a great golfer. Louis Armstrong’s trumpet wasn’t the reason he was a revolutionary figure in American jazz. Similarly, project management software is not the key to being a world-class project manager. Most courses and tutorials on project management software simply introduce students to the software’s features and where to click the mouse to make the software do certain things. They barely mention—if at all—the project management processes the software was designed to support. Yet often people with a rudimentary knowledge of a project management software tool believe they know all about project management. In the hands of an untrained project manager, that software can be more dangerous than helpful to a project.
- Project managers tend to overvalue their past project management experience.

*Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.*

—Vince Lombardi

Experience is a great teacher—if you’ve been learning the right lessons. Just because an individual has managed projects for ten years doesn’t mean that he or she has done so correctly or successfully. Has this project manager achieved the desired results? Were the projects relatively small and/or simple, so that the experience isn’t a meaningful qualification for the larger and more complex project at hand? The only experience that is a valid qualification for project management competence is the successful

application of proven project management processes on projects of significant size and complexity.

- Even earning a master's degree or a formal certification in project management is no guarantee that an individual is a competent project manager. However, such credentials lead people to believe they have real-world skills, when what they've got is book knowledge and theory. I know this will be heresy to some, but I have met too many people with such credentials who cannot manage projects successfully. Yes, anyone who has acquired the credential has demonstrated the personal commitment and the initiative necessary to jump through the required hoops. But does passing an exam demonstrate mastery of project management processes? Is there any assurance the candidate has successful experience applying the techniques he or she has been taught?

## Make *Your* Project Succeed!

You can acquire the skills you need to effectively manage large, complex projects in the fast-paced, rapidly changing, highly competitive 24/7 global marketplace and arm your organization with the power of the Project Success Method.

We've worked in companies as diverse as Alltel, Caterpillar, The Coca-Cola Company, Delta Air Lines, Disney, Fujitsu, Ingersoll Rand, Kimberly-Clark, Marriott, Radio Shack, TRW, and Turner Broadcasting.

In all of the industries represented by these firms, and in virtually any other endeavor I can think of, the dominant organizations are those that consistently are more agile than their competition. They develop and launch new products, technologies, systems, and strategic programs more quickly and more efficiently than their competitors. They open new facilities faster. They forge winning mergers and acquisitions,

develop marketing campaigns, and stage special events that leave the competition in the dust.

These are the companies that have developed the knowledge, skills, tools, and systems required to manage projects successfully. They are effective because they know what tools and techniques really work to manage projects. They understand the principles that generate the project power to overcome the inevitable, dynamic challenges that any large, complex project will involve.

They've learned the tested, proven principles that underlie The Project Success Method. This methodology was developed by A. P. (Dennis) Young and Dr. Thomas B. Clark, who were the co-founders of our firm. The effectiveness of The Project Success Method has been proven by its application to thousands of our clients' complex, business-critical projects since 1983.

## What Is The Project Success Method?

The Project Success Method is quite simply a way to manage projects that has been honed to the essentials and sharply focused on achieving positive results in all three areas of project performance: *Quality, Time, and Cost*.

The Project Success Method will give you and your organization the key principles and management processes you need to manage projects effectively, achieve success, and empower team members to experience a sense of accomplishment and take pride in their work.

Having the ability to execute projects more effectively, faster, and at lower cost than your competition generates competitive advantage. Your organization will be more nimble, more responsive to customers and markets, and better able to compete in today's demanding, fast-moving global economy.

As an individual who has the skills to lead successful projects, you will enjoy a personal competitive advantage, too. Effective

project leaders are more valued today than ever, especially when their success is clearly the result of applying a structured, disciplined approach like The Project Success Method.

Fail to manage projects effectively and the reverse will be true. Your company will be at a competitive disadvantage. You will be ineffective in meeting customers' needs. You will waste time and money. You, your associates, and employees will be dissatisfied and professionally unfulfilled.

Almost three decades ago, Tom Peters, co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, predicted that the ability to execute projects successfully would become an unparalleled source of competitive advantage. Events have proven how right he was. The power that flows from the ability to manage projects successfully is real. If you don't have it, you are at a significant disadvantage to those who do.

That power is here, in The Project Success Method.

You're probably asking yourself, how can this little book tell me what I need to know about project management, when there are bookshelves full of thick textbooks on the subject?

The Project Success Method will provide you with everything you need to manage projects, because in the practice of project management, as in pretty much every other area, the 80/20 Rule (or Pareto Principle) applies. Only here, it's more like the 90/10 Rule. Some 90 percent of the content you find in those thick project management textbooks is superfluous and of little value on most projects. The Project Success Method focuses on the 10 percent that is essential to success.

We call The Project Success Method "the easier way," because it is the most direct route to managing projects effectively. We formulated The Project Success Method to work in the real world, from real-world experience.

The Project Success Method is project management stripped of its unessential baggage. It is what you really need to know to manage your projects successfully. Learn it and be successful!

## Key Takeaways

- Companies run day-to-day on well-defined *processes*. Companies use *projects* to create competitive advantage through strategic change.
- Projects fail for a few basic reasons.
- Be skeptical of the claims other individuals make about their project management expertise. Demand to see evidence that they have effectively applied proven project management processes to achieve success on projects of significant size and complexity.
- The key to managing projects successfully is to master a proven, structured, disciplined approach to defining, planning, and controlling complex projects—The Project Success Method.
- Individuals who have the skills to lead successful projects are highly valued in organizations, and they enjoy a competitive advantage over their peers.
- Some 90 percent of the real value of project management knowledge comes from a small number of key principles. These are embodied in The Project Success Method.