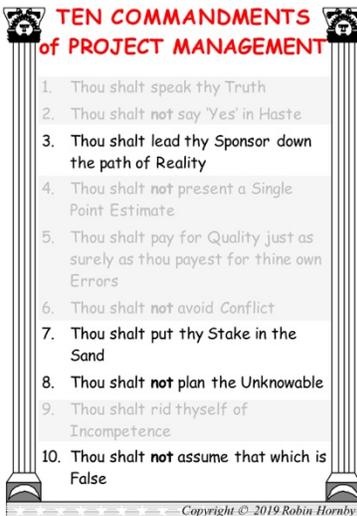# Post11 – Building Alignment

This 10-minute read explains the rules and techniques that give a project clear direction and support the project manager's efforts to create momentum. This is leadership-focused project management, taken from four chapters of my first book, Ten Commandments of Project Management, and is the last of three related posts.

Origins

Having spent much of my career specifying processes and tools to fit the project's needs, it gradually dawned on me that solving people-issues really drives most project success factors. Much of this boils down to confident leadership behaviours that inspire a sense of inevitability about the ultimate success of the project. I believe excellent leaders know instinctively how to do this, perhaps it correlates with powers of persuasion and other specific personality traits; it certainly falls outside the scope of project management (PM) standards such as PMBOK®. Perhaps a book could be written about that topic alone. But in the project context there are also specific and uncomplicated rules that a mere-mortal PM can adopt to keep the project moving to its destination.

TEN COMMANDMENTS of PROJECT MANAGEMENT

1. Thou shalt speak thy Truth
2. Thou shalt **not** say 'Yes' in Haste
3. Thou shalt lead thy Sponsor down the path of Reality
4. Thou shalt **not** present a Single Point Estimate
5. Thou shalt pay for Quality just as surely as thou payest for thine own Errors
6. Thou shalt **not** avoid Conflict
7. Thou shalt put thy Stake in the Sand
8. Thou shalt **not** plan the Unknowable
9. Thou shalt rid thyself of Incompetence
10. Thou shalt **not** assume that which is False

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When I started part-time teaching a common question was something like "what should I do when xxx happens on my project?" I think most students found the inevitable "it depends" response a trifle frustrating. This led me to ask: are there rules for project management behaviour, always valid, always practical, that don't require a long interrogation into the project to determine their application? Thus was born *Ten Commandments of Project Management – A brief guide to the art of righteous project management*, which you can read a bit more about here.

Analysis

The Ten Commandments separate into three areas of PM leadership, summarized as: when and how to commit to difficult but necessary action, learning to recognize and choose the right response, and building project direction and momentum. Or: Action, Judgment, and Alignment. This post is focused on Alignment.

A good leader knows that an essential part of the role is to build unity of purpose, while at the same time facing legitimate diversity of opinion. The leader must also adopt a style appropriate to the circumstances, sometimes dictatorial, sometimes consensus-driven, and sometimes democratic. A trusted confidant or experienced coach can help, but often the project manager is left to act alone and unsupported. So, these four commandments will guide the PM, help avoid mistakes, and short-circuit the road to experience without repeated semesters at SHK (School of Hard Knocks!). They are: 1 Thou shalt lead thy Sponsor down the path of Reality, 2 Thou shalt put thy Stake in the Sand, 3 Thou shalt not Plan the Unknowable, and 4 Thou shalt not Assume that which is False.

1 Thou shalt lead thy Sponsor down the path of Reality

The PM/Sponsor relationship strongly influences the success of the project. An amicable and positive social connection certainly helps, but maintaining this must not get in the way of correcting misapprehensions about agreed business requirements or faulty project assumptions. The proactive PM must ensure there is no disconnect between the reality of the project and the world of dreams where the sponsor may be wandering. Causes are numerous: commonly a sponsor lacks the technical knowledge to appreciate the constraints or challenges of the project; there may be areas where the

sponsor is just uninformed such as resource weaknesses within her own organization; often a sponsor's personal goals can influence the project and while this is not inherently wrong it can be damaging if they

are not known to the PM; there can also be a plain element of good old wishful thinking, and of course the political agendas of advisors and suppliers will colour all of this.
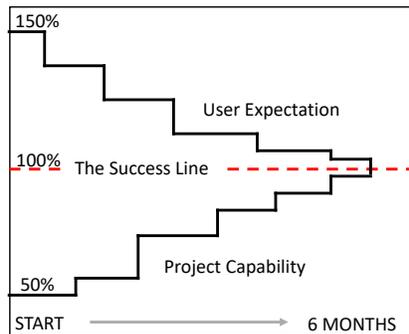
A model of project success, first articulated by Ken Orr, can help the PM comprehend and plan out solutions for dealing with these issues. Although intended to address the technical capability of the project, the concept is general and with some care it can frame a coffee conversation with the sponsor. Success is promoted when capability and expectation converge; it is not instantaneous but is nurtured over a period of time.

Alignment Advice
- Develop strong objectives statements with the sponsor at the outset of the project and weave them into presentations and discussions frequently. (For a discussion on relevant techniques, refer to *Put Quality in its Place*).
- Use the charter to ensure project benefits are defined and linked to project objectives, and that the sponsor's role is clear. This provides a rationale for change orders if the sponsor discusses expected but undocumented benefits.
- Do not create high risk expectations yourself – under-promise and over-deliver.

Leaving unrealistic expectations uncorrected or fostering them with ill-advised and ambiguous statements are mistakes that will come back to haunt you.

2 Thou shalt put thy Stake in the Sand.
One of my favorite metaphors characterizes the initiation of a project as creating order from chaos. Perhaps a tad over-dramatic, but it captures the usual conditions: unclear roles and responsibilities, no

workplans, the team still forming, and uncertainty about what exactly everyone is trying to achieve. These issues must be resolved, but it's a continuing process as changes occur. 'Putting a stake in the sand' is as much a style of management as a result and hastens the process of creating and maintaining order.
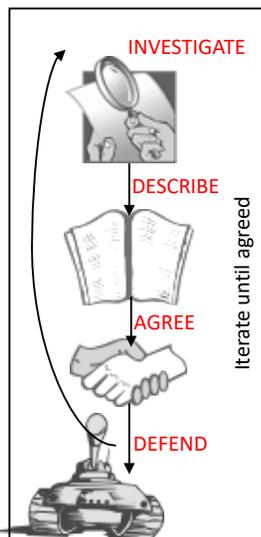
The mantra at the start of every project is 'figure out the scope'. Here is the first and doubtless the most significant application of staking. Stakes are usually planted in progressive fashion – definition of business functions, data entities, workflows, interfaces and so on. The end-point of scope staking is usually a WBS and this is declared as baseline. Don't kid yourself that the stake is now in concrete. Expect to continually cycle using the best model: Investigate, Describe, Agree, and Defend.

This model is naturally applied to scope, but can apply to other elements of the project such as assumptions, resourcing, estimates, policies and processes. The aim is to eliminate the PM's enemy - ambiguity. No one should be in any doubt of your position on matters of significance.

Alignment Advice
- The PM has to hustle. Project commitment depends on resolving unknowns and ambiguities, and everyone, especially those with authority, must be aware of the PM's energy and persistence to get
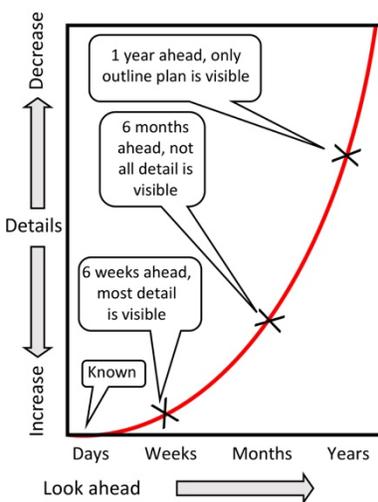
agreements. At the same time, the stake in the sand analogy comforts overcautious stakeholders that their agreement is not perpetual and things can change, and probably will.

- Pareto's principle (80/20 Rule) is hugely relevant, so use it. For example, the law of diminishing returns might suggest an additional 20% of value can only be obtained by expending a further 80% of effort.

- Formalize the iterative nature of project development through an understandable methodology where everyone sees the project plan elaborated one stake at a time, such as: requirements, scope, tasks, dependencies, effort, skills and resources, schedule, organization and costs.

Ideally, all stakeholders understand (and agree) where the stake is planted on these matters. But an open stance is essential for good stakeholder relations as long as a process governs the execution of the changes. If the stake moves, everyone needs to know who moved it, why it was moved, and exactly where it is now.

3 Thou shalt not Plan the Unknowable

There comes a point in project planning when a rational process using reliable data shifts to an exercise in crystal ball gazing. The pressures to do so arise primarily in large projects and come from the insistence of sponsors and the need to comply with conditions on long-term contracts. It's a trap. During execution, rather than the project plan being a useful tool of the PM, it becomes an albatross around her neck as she strives to fit project reality into the fantasy of a plan developed 18 months earlier and not allowed to change. I can personally attest to the useless labour and the delusion of maintaining two plans – one to present to the sponsor et al, and one that we actually used!

From my experience, every non-trivial project possesses a planning horizon beyond which there are so many unresolved variables that detailed planning is an empty intellectual exercise. To illustrate; I may know where I am lunching tomorrow, but not next month. I could give a guess, but that is only the appearance of usefulness.

The secret of the planning horizon is the Rule of Six; every detail can be predicted or dictated within six days, but more than six weeks some details are indeterminate. The discernment of details continues to diminish until at six months and beyond, plans are only reliable at a more consolidated view. For projects with durations of a year or more, long-range plans should only be published in outline.

Alignment Advice

- Granular detail in schedules beyond six months such as specific resources (names), activities, minor dependences and milestones are best not published and should be viewed cautiously.

- As the horizon moves out from six months, document the schedule using higher level elements such as phases, deliverables, and key milestones.

- Use the rolling wave actively as a planning tool and use milestones to indicate when sufficient project information is available to construct the next phase of detailed plans.

- Plan using product releases as a 'divide and conquer' strategy, creating a hierarchy of plans: the project plan, release plans, phase plans, and ad hoc plans.

- Beyond the planning horizon, always include contingency rather than bogus detailed plans.

- In very difficult planning situations and if contract conditions permit, fix the schedule and effort, and vary the scope.

Planning large projects is analogous to planning a white-water raft trip. You need to know team size and assign key roles. It is essential to requisition equipment and resources, to establish important dates and times such as for departure and estimated arrival at the destination. Overnight bivouacs, portages, and provisioning points must be identified. However, it is an absolute waste of time planning the rocks you're going to bounce off on the trips down the rapids!

4 Thou shalt not Assume that which is False

The well-worn adage 'ASSUME makes an ASS out of U and ME' has a spot of truth in it, but unfortunately it labels assumptions as villains, when in the right hands they can be the good guys. How can you construct a defensible estimate without stating your assumptions? How can you proceed in the face of a low probability but high impact risk without stating an assumption? In short, projects would grind to a halt if it weren't for assumptions. For the PM to avoid a trap, the trick is to make sure the assumptions are realistic, reviewed for feasibility with the appropriate authorities, and carefully documented.

I think part of the bad press comes from the PMBOK® definition which asserts that an assumption is "a factor in the planning process that is considered to be true, real, or certain, without proof or demonstration". Not being false is not the same as being true – no PM would consider an assumption to be true. It all boils down to risks and probabilities.
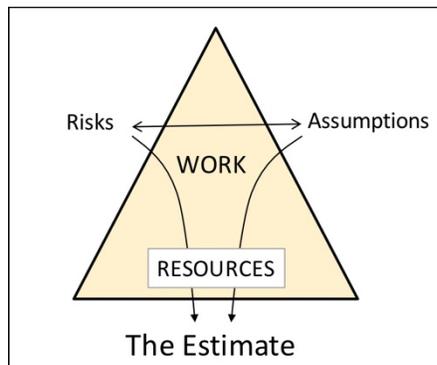
Assumptions might apply to many elements of a project, but a most important impact is on estimates. The model formalized in my estimating guide emphasises the need to establish assumptions, risks, and resource skills (another triangle!) before estimating the work. Common types of assumptions include: stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, skills of the team, work complexity, adequacy of facilities and hardware, work assignments on interfaces, expeditious approvals and decisions, project dependencies such as technical support, and compatibility of elements in the environment.

In the absence of a commitment from third parties, an assumption is essential, for example: "we assume that resources will be available from the Accounting Department to work on acceptance testing during September and October." BUT – is it feasible and reasonable? This the PM must establish.

A common risky assumption is that the project team will be staffed with the best. Ain't gonna happen. And as the productivity difference between the best and the mediocre can be ten times, then you have definitely fallen into the assumption trap.

Implicit assumptions are another danger - they may be unstated, but are present nonetheless. To help flush them out, use a checklist derived from the common types listed above, but developed for your typical project applications.

Alignment Advice

- Insist on a set of assumptions to accompany every estimate you review or prepare.
- Use standard estimating grids to force explicit complexity assumptions as described in *Commercial Project Management*.
- Be prepared to coach technical staff in formulation of assumptions.

- Write down assumptions – if you don't, stakeholders will read your plan and form their own assumptions to fit their personal views.

So, make sure you think carefully about assumptions as a key pillar of project planning, and recognise that useless, unrealistic, or ambiguous assumptions left unchallenged can be as damaging to a project as no assumptions at all. Valid assumptions require hard work.

The Takeaway

A pleasing analogy for alignment describes a successful project as an unstoppable locomotive heading to its destination. Leadership style and charisma doubtless have an influence in shaping conditions for success, but while we are all working on our charisma, pay attention to the simple nuts and bolts issues that keep the locomotive on the track:

1. Keep sponsor (and stakeholder) expectations in line with forecast results.

2. Make sure you have a clear position on all aspects of the project and that others understand it.

3. Do not load the distant reaches of the project plan with unknowable details that create an illusion of accuracy and a false commitment you will regret.

4. And, make assumptions (you have to), but avoid over-optimistic, low probability or false assumptions that will lead you and everyone else off the track.

Keeping aligned means eliminating perceptual divergence, and pending the development of a magical mind-reading apparatus for PMs, these four rules will help you do it. Let me know below if you have any mind-reading tips of your own.

Robin's new book Commercial Project Management – A Guide for Selling and Delivering Professional Services published by Routledge is a complete exposé for the commercial environment. The complementary 2-day seminar, delivered in Robin's enthusiastic style, is packed with insider tips, techniques, and (mainly) true cautionary tales. Contact Robin at tmi@telus.net. A pdf download of this article can be found at www.tmipm.com

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