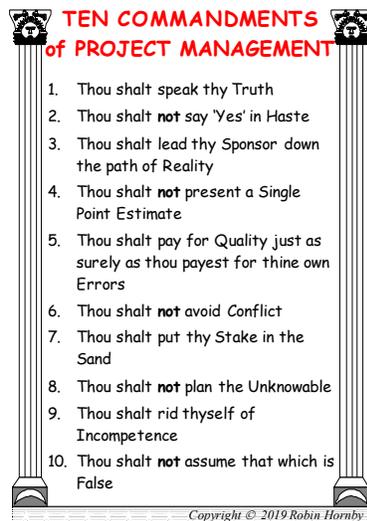


Post9 - When to Take Action

This 5-minute read explores when a PM must commit to difficult but necessary action. This is leadership-focused project management, taken from three chapters of my first book, *Ten Commandments of Project Management*.

Origins

Having spent much of my career specifying processes, tools, etc. that seemed to fit the needs of the project, it gradually dawned on me that solving people-issues really drives most project success factors. Much of this knowledge boils down to leadership behaviors that resolve negative circumstances and



certainly fall outside the scope of PM standards such as PMBOK®. There is also a reluctance to act in unpleasant situations as there is always hope that things will automatically get better or be dealt with by somebody else. Many PMs lack confidence to intervene constructively due to lack of experience and only a general knowledge of their options - there is always a demand for specifics. 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 forced me to start questioning; are there rules for project management behavior, always valid, always practical, and 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](#).

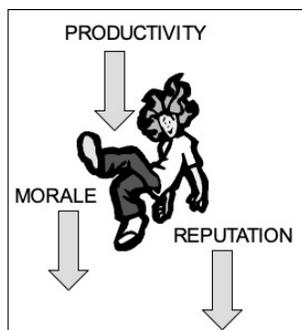
Analysis

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 path, and building project direction and momentum. Or: Action, Judgment, and Alignment. This post is focused on action.

A good leader knows that an essential part of the role is to make difficult decisions and occasionally take unpopular actions. A trusted confidant or experienced coach can share the load, but often the project manager is left to act alone and unsupported. So, these three 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 Rid Thyself of Incompetence, 2 Thou Shalt Not Avoid Conflict, and 3 Thou Shalt Pay for Quality, Just as Surely as Thou Payest for Thy Errors.

1 Thou Shalt Rid Thyself of Incompetence

I know what you’re are thinking – easier said than done. Teams are always assembled under constraints, and the best are in short supply. Your team may include the inexperienced, the quirky, and the plain mediocre. But your job is to deal with it.



Incompetence is not a matter for debate, so the first step is to evaluate the observed productivity failure and make sure incompetence truly is the root cause – not always the case. When present, there are negative consequences that cascade. Poor work from one team member always impacts the work of others, unscheduled rework and assistance is needed, morale starts to nosedive, and your project rapidly assumes a reputation as a failure in waiting. A serious one-on-one with the individual is obviously the first step, but if no improvement occurs, further action must be taken.

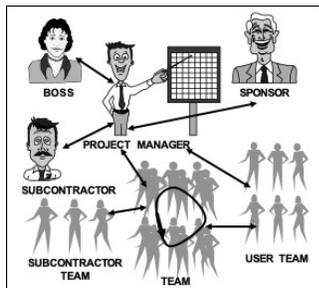
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Action Options: Consult with the line manager/HR, initiate corporate performance improvement program, redesign the team, schedule training and/or coaching, move the problem elsewhere.

This is a serious matter for the PM, usually complicated and difficult to resolve. It's worth remembering that your first duty is to the project. If the actions yield no resolution, and senior authority is advising you to "live with it", then so be it. Make sure your resolution efforts are on the record, and modify your effort and schedule estimates as necessary.

2 Thou Shalt Not Avoid Conflict.

There are many sources of conflict in a typical project. Your challenge is to keep your antenna up and decide to act before behavior becomes destructive. Personal conflict, more than business conflict, is the issue most managers choose to ignore in the hope that it goes away. Don't – it won't!



Business conflict can arise from many different causes: different beliefs or prejudices, contrary technical opinions, constraints not accepted, overlapping management authorities, and different business interests or hidden objectives. The PM needs these most cited skills – communication and negotiation. She will also benefit from specific conflict resolution skills originally expounded in the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument: Constructive competition, Collaboration, Compromise, Avoidance, and Accommodation.

But sometimes conflict is just another plain old people-issue which raises stress levels, undermines teamwork, involves the PM in "he said, she said" arguments, finger-pointing, non-cooperation, and eventual degeneration of the PM's authority. The strategy to adopt will depend upon whether the conflict is within the team, between the team and the PM, or with the sponsor. (Self-knowledge is important here – are you the problem?). Diagnoses might include a poor personality fit with the team, cultural blind spots, resentments, or minimal alignment with project objectives and assigned responsibilities.

Action Options: Confront the issue, audit/repair roles and responsibilities, repair team rules/procedures with the collaboration of conflicted individuals, revise the communications plan, use time-outs.

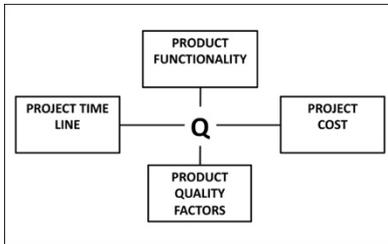
No matter how the conflict originates, if the PM wants to be effective in its resolution, his communication and negotiation skills will come to naught if he has not earned the trust of the team and stakeholders. Without trust, little progress will be made.

3 Thou Shalt Pay for Quality, Just as Surely as Thou Payest for Thy Errors

Somewhere along the line, quality has lost its way. Maybe the advent of corporate initiatives (6 Sigma, ISO etc.) has reduced the role of the PM as quality leader. Very few projects enjoy the benefit of a clear set of quality goals and a budget to match. Most sponsors are happy to ignore the issue or, if pressed, tell you they want high quality, of course, and leave you to figure it out. They may even quote the myth that "quality is free"; and reject any discussion of a budget for quality. The answer is to understand the realistic quality goals that could be adopted, and open up a meaningful discussion that pinpoints quality factors before you deliver, rather than after.

Another point of confusion is the distinction between project and product quality. They are connected, naturally (see [Post3 Did you give up on quality?](#)) but require separate specification. Project quality is especially leveraged by the leadership, knowledge, and example of the PM.

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In this quadrant model, quality is defined as an intersection of project execution requirements on one axis, and product requirements on the second axis. Execution requirements are represented by meeting cost and schedule targets and product requirements include functionality and quality factors. Thus, the customer experiences quality when trade-offs between functionality, product quality factors, time, and cost are optimized.

The model acknowledges that trade-offs are a fact of project life, and that quality in the project world had two dimensions – quality of project execution and the quality of the product. It's a good idea to use the model in conversation with the client before the project starts, and discuss the trade-off of factors that might be required in order to accomplish the prime objective.

Action Options: Establish a norm for quality project work (cultural), explain, justify, and enforce your project quality standards, use systematic questioning and the Socratic method to establish specific quality factors, optimize cost of quality, negotiate trade-offs, set quality metrics, work to a quality plan.

According to *Commercial Project Management*, summarized [here](#), the single most beneficial and practical effort that the PM can make to take quality seriously is to create a quality plan and ensure it is agreed with all stakeholders. Such a plan might include quality objectives and factors, commercial or technical standards, responsibilities, training needs, mandatory documentation, metrics, and probably more.

Showing leadership on quality also places an onus on the PM to build quality methods into his own personal work and interactions. Stay your hand on impetuous email, don't issue documents without an external review, manage meetings with an agenda and minute actions and decisions, use proper procedures for PM decision-making, and so forth. Leadership by example is very important.

Takeaway

Of the project advice in the *Ten Commandments*, the three that require specific and potentially difficult action from the PM are the most influential in building and maintaining a positive work environment. Of course, this is not an inclusive list, but in my view, it represents advice that is always relevant.

Success will also depend on a PM foundation of trust, confidence to act, taking quality personally, and reliance on the quality plan as the quality reference.

Political awareness will inevitably be a factor when determining and carrying out the suggested actions. The wise PM will establish good communications with senior authorities as there is every chance that aggrieved individuals will go over his head.

If you find it extremely uncomfortable confronting people, personal knowledge gained by adopting behavioral guides such as the Social Style Profile might be helpful. In any event strive to keep conversations non-accusative and as impersonal as possible. For example, don't say "Your comment to Joe was offensive and you should apologize", but something like "I noticed that Joe reacted negatively to your remark. It's important to me, and all of us, to work in a positive environment. Could we discuss how best to handle this in the future?"

My position is that the PM must accept responsibility for team competence, conflict resolution, and quality. The reader may feel this is overdemanding. Certainly, in some cases the responsibility is shared and constraints may be unsurmountable, but the PM must still answer for the success of her project.

Your thoughts on this are welcome.

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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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