By any yardstick, the change is dramatic. Service providers are now careful to propose professional project managers who guarantee successful service delivery. Ten or fifteen years ago, most customers rejected such an approach by denigrating it as ‘unnecessary overhead’. One after another, the leaders in the corporate world are establishing so-called ‘project management offices’, often with resources who themselves have barely shed their training wheels, but are now expected to lead the way in Canada’s new projectized organizations. Today, demand for skilled project managers who have actually learned this discipline exceeds supply, even though membership in professional associations, notably the Project Management Institute in North America, has been doubling every 5 years and currently stands at over 100,000. The professional designation offered by PMI based on experience and a four hour examination allows the recipient to place PMP (Project Management Professional) after his or her name (this is a profession where women are starting to make real inroads). Unlike the situation not so very long ago, PMP qualifications now receive recognition and respect in the corridors of power, in turn encouraging employees to seriously consider a skills upgrade. The result of that has been an explosion in project management training, now virtually an industry in its own right.

But the real tell-tale that project management is not just another fad running its course is the relentless increase in published titles. There are now well over a hundred books in print dealing with just about every conceivable aspect of this complex, but essentially commonsense discipline. Latest in the list is my own book - Ten Commandments of Project Management - A brief guide to the art of righteous project management. After a career spent specifying processes, tools, and techniques that seemed to fit the needs of the project environment, I gradually came to a conclusion that solving ‘people issues’ really drives most project success factors. A toolkit full of processes and techniques is useful, but certainly doesn’t guarantee success. I concluded something that project managers don’t want to hear – projects often fail because project managers make mistakes! I believe that by naming these mistakes and the behaviour that caused them, we
can recognize and learn to avoid them in the future.

So, how do I propose to short-circuit the road to experience, without repeated semesters at the School of Hard Knocks? Well, this is where the analogy with the Ten Commandments comes into play. Ten rules for project management behaviour, always valid, always practical, and guaranteed to accelerate the project manager’s learning curve. Here they are:

1. Thou Shalt Speak Thy Truth. The issue of integrity is absolutely central to any management role. There are several deception models encountered in the world of projects; my favourite is the ‘Alice in Wonderland’ syndrome. In this charade, the project manager collaborates with an executive edict calling for an impossible delivery date. The tragedy is that tough delivery dates can be met – but only by honest exposition of creative or compromise options early in the project rather than when it’s too late.

2. Thou Shalt Not Say “Yes” in Haste. Pressures to be agreeable infect the project manager, not just the salesman. And why not, it’s a human trait! The Lure of the Big Deal is a frequent factor in this scenario, where the dollars are so big, no scope seems impossible. Lots of options on how to deal with this phenomenon, but it all centres on various flavours of ‘pause, reflect, respond’.

3. Thou Shalt Lead Thy Sponsor down the Path of Reality. More projects go off the rails due to communication failure than any other reason. All stakeholders deserve the best when it comes to communicating, but the project sponsor is your number one priority. Do you understand his or her corporate and personal goals? Can you model exactly how your project will meet those goals? The right answers to these key questions will keep you and your sponsor marching side by side.

4. Thou Shalt Not Present a Single Point Estimate. Mismatching the scope and the estimate is a surefire recipe for getting off to a bad start. And in projects, a bad finish is usually caused by a bad start. So, stop pretending to be a magician, and acknowledge that the estimate is not precisely known. The key trick is to learn techniques that still give sponsors the budget figures they need without locking yourself into an estimate that subsequently proves to be totally inadequate.

5. Thou Shalt Pay for Quality, Just as Surely as Thou Payest for Thy Errors. 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 get briefed on the cost of quality optimization theory, the various goals of quality that can be adopted, and open up a meaningful discussion before you deliver, rather than after.

6. 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 behaviour 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!

7. Thou Shalt Put Thy Stake in the Sand. The text books will all emphasize the idea of progressive elaboration. This is possibly the single most important principle to understand about projects. But you need an arsenal of supportive behaviour to get rid of ambiguity without putting stakeholders off-side while you hustle your way to baseline. It’s time to get serious about Pareto’s Principle and its cousin the 80/20 rule.

8. Thou Shalt Not Plan the Unknowable. The trap that awaits us here is enslavement to an unworkable plan. You must never forget that the plan is a tool of the project manager, and not a sacred text. So don’t put yourself in a pickle by including guessed-at imaginative detail 12 months into the future. Heck, you don’t know where you’re having lunch Friday next week; so why is your project schedule any different? This is typically a large project dilemma and solutions are found by applying the rolling wave, planning by cycle, and recognizing the very special skills that attach to large project management.

9. Thou Shalt Rid Thyselv of Incompetence. The first step is to evaluate your case of
productivity failure and make sure incompetence truly is the root cause – not always the case. But when it is present, you must deal with it because there are so many negative consequences if you don’t. 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.

10. Thou Shalt Not Assume that which is False. Most project managers have had the need for explicit, written assumptions beaten in to them. Unfortunately many are still learning how to frame a realistic assumption and how get their estimators to work with the concept of complexity scales. One answer is to embed complexity (or quality) assumptions into standard estimating grids as a means of encapsulating the basis for estimate. Some professions do this well (e.g. construction), but others have a long way to go.

In my experience, none of these commandments are “easy”. Conversely, it seems to me that we are programmed by our personalities to do the very opposite of what good project management behaviour demands. Why is that? Behavioural science has some answers, but still hasn’t come up with the ideal personality type for a project manager. Is a thinker, or a relationship person, or a promoter, or a full-steam ahead, ‘damn the torpedoes’ type of person the best? We don’t know, they all have their strengths and weaknesses. But we do think that whatever your type, you will enjoy increased project success with these ten project management commandments written into your playbook.