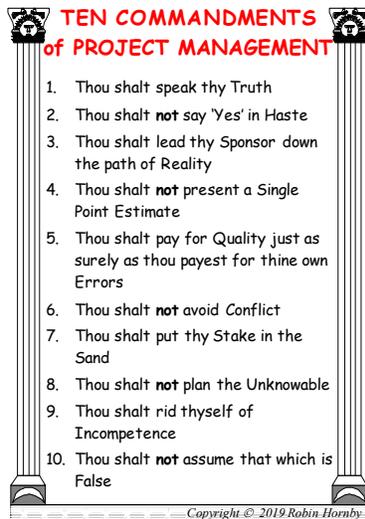# Post10 - When Judgment Counts

This 8-minute read provides guidance when the project manager is under pressure to quickly assess, judge, and decide. 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 and tools 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 behaviours that require rapid assessment, judgment, and a decision often at variance with our natural impulse. It certainly falls outside the scope of project management (PM) standards such as PMBOK®. Acting contrary to our instincts is hard; in fact, many times we are instructed to trust our intuitive response. I would generally agree with this advice on matters of ethics, but not necessarily in matters of judgment, or when there is a hard way out or an easy one!

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 judgment.

A good leader knows that an essential part of the role involves decision-making, sometimes risking disagreement, adding to difficulty, or striving to maintain options. A trusted confidant or experienced coach can help, 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 Speak thy Truth, 2 Thou shalt not say Yes in Haste, and 3 Thou shalt not Present a Single Point Estimate.

1 Thou shalt Speak thy Truth

I think there are two broad aspects to the question of project honesty. The first is personal: a matter of PM integrity. The second is less distinct; it's the issue of professional judgment and whether it aligns with project conditions and direction. They are connected, of course. If you are reluctant or fail to act on your judgment, then your integrity will be called into question. That is serious; a reputation for integrity takes time to establish, but can be lost very quickly.

Personal integrity is often tested – pressures to manipulate project status, to overstate earned revenue, to provide misleading references, to misstate project impacts . . . these pressures must be deflected with political dexterity.

Professional judgment is more complex, and I have found it useful to consult what I call 'models of deception' to help assess my behaviour.
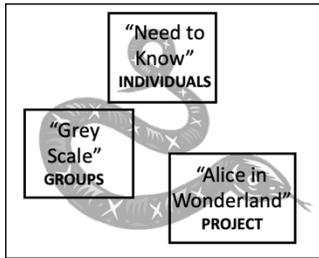
The 'Need to Know' model operates at the individual level and can very easily be morphed into a justification for withholding information, even when asked, and then if necessary substituting false information.

The 'Grey Scale' model operates on groups and offers a perspective that can be manipulated to alter understandings depending on the interests or responsibilities of the group being addressed. These deceptions are justified on a narrow view of project objectives, and are the start of a slippery slope.

The 'Alice in Wonderland' model is a project-wide phenomenon in which fantasy (very often schedule demands) must be accepted as reality because any other reaction is unacceptable to the sponsor and is seen as a lack of commitment.

Judgment Guidelines

- If information affects the individual, they should be told.

- Ask yourself when addressing one group of stakeholders - "Would I say this to *all* stakeholders?"

- Speaking truth to power needs an impersonal framework, as well as guts. In Post4 The Politics of Risk, I suggested that focusing on risk factors, probabilities, and analytics could help diffuse potential political issues, or at least move the assessment of the fantasy project onto more constructive ground.

I am not suggesting self-immolation, or 'leading with your chin'; it helps to differentiate between 'truth' and forecasts based on probabilities and assumptions. Commit but don't promise. Always strive to keep the project grounded in reality and when necessary speak your truth with courage and conviction.

2 Thou shalt not say Yes in Haste.

People, generally, like to be agreeable and according to behaviourists about 25% of us have that embedded as their natural style. And saying 'yes' to a request is almost certainly easier (short-term) than saying 'no'. Whoever you are on the team – salesperson/client manager, project manager, or team member, there will be pressure to agree to something right now.

Salespeople, especially, are motivated to see a project sold. To nurture their relationships, they might make promises that jeopardize balance of the triple constraint. During pre-sales, a phenomenon I call the *lure of the big deal* can operate on both salespeople and PM alike - "this deal is too big to walk away from", and the insidious "with this budget we could do it, whatever the scope is!" After initiation, PMs are obviously exposed to project requests to add function, improve quality, change work assignments, approve time-off and training, and satisfy miscellaneous demands from stakeholders. And the team is not immune – members will be approached informally to make 'small' changes; they may work on covert operations; overtime for tasks may not be reported (still a 'yes' even though they didn't ask!), and possibly more.
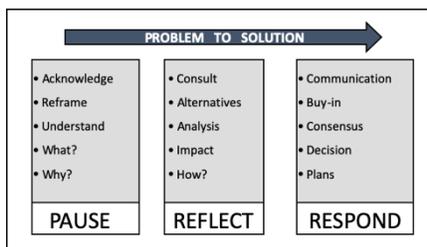
There are no request situations so drastic, other than an act of God, that require an immediate response. So, this is the model to apply: Pause, Reflect, Respond. The amount of time, and the degree of formality devoted to this process is variable and depends upon the request. Authorization for a 3-day absence may require a form to be filled and 15 minutes over coffee. Approval of a project bid may require senior business and delivery

management signatures over 2 days of review meetings. Scope changes will follow a contractually specified procedure and may be submitted for approval weekly.

Judgment Guidelines

- Even if the request is clear, and documentation unrequired, force the mental process of Pause, Reflect, Respond, and give yourself breathing space.

- If the request is subject to procedure, make sure the procedure is agreed and in place early. Eliminate precedents that avoid the procedure.

- If a decision is urgent, find out why.

- Think out acceptable options, especially if the request impacts the project and may be denied. Remember, management prefer choices rather than 'no'.

- Denying a request out-of-hand is only the best approach in rare situations. Adopt the stance of 'our' problem (not mine or yours). Look for compromise solutions suggested by the requester. Ask, how can project objectives still be met and your request accommodated?

- Understand your relationship and the integrity of the requestor - being agreeable and waiving costs for future considerations is a PM prerogative (used judiciously), so long as impacts are discussed.

- Recognize your natural style and make sure it is not influencing your decision.

The most hazardous time for requests that impact the project is between contract signing and declaration of baseline. Pressure will come from senior managers and the PM will be anxious to establish good relationships and a harmonious start-up. No doubt the politically-adroit PM will find these waters easier to navigate than his less gifted colleagues, but always Pause, Reflect, Respond.

Project initiation is also the time to establish clear ground-rules with the team. Make sure they know their responsibilities, their delegation limits, the importance of time recording, and how to go about training and absence approvals.

Remember the truism: Projects go wrong at the start, not at the end!

3 Thou shalt not Present a Single Point Estimate

It seems inevitable that when a number is inadvisably put on the table, even if emphasized to be a ballpark estimate, it is remembered infallibly by those with the budget. And this seems true for inhouse projects as well as commercial, where this error can be particularly unforgiving.

This leads to serious problems. Budgets are set for projects without any understanding of what could be achieved and major decisions are based on unreliable data. Unrealistic expectations then become a headache for the incoming PM.

This is framed as a technical PM issue, but to some extent it equates to the general rule to keep options open – don't create a constraint if you don't have to. Although other factors contribute, the phenomenon of risk, or uncertainty, is the main culprit. So, the best approach is to build risk assessment early in the game, and promote an understanding among the key stakeholders.
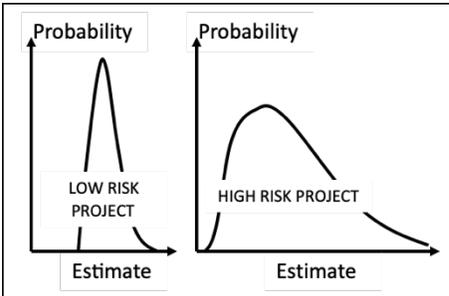
Project estimates, for example, can be explained using a Probability Model based on simple statistics theory. A low-risk project possesses a narrow range of estimates for which completion can be expected. In statistics lingo, a 67% chance within one sigma of the median. But for high-risk projects, sigma (variability) is much larger. According to *Commercial Project Management*, summarized [here](), this provides a logical and persuasive methodology for contingency calculation.

Judgment Guidelines

- Consider alternatives for expressing a range – an estimate plus or minus, a low to high point, or an estimate plus a confidence factor. There are pros and cons for each.

- Generally, the best choice is 'most likely estimate' plus a contingency.

- As the project proceeds, risks are eliminated or are better understood and the estimate range tightens.

- Estimating must always be a formal process – keep history, compare actuals, document risks and assumptions.

- Don't confuse estimating and negotiating. My rule is not to negotiate a most likely estimate (unless scope etc. changes), but contingency can be negotiated if uncertainty can be removed.

Variability in estimates is strongly linked to risk analysis and I have long been a firm proponent of adopting a systems approach to risk and making it a feature of the project. Everyone knows that risk is a part of life, and projects are not immune! Usually, stakeholders can be persuaded to accept risk methods which greatly improves teamwork and reduces finger pointing.

A final word on contingency. At year-end, projects are often under pressure from Finance to demonstrate progress, expressed as earned revenue. PMs should never reduce ETCs, but it may be helpful, and still prudent, to release a certain amount of contingency.

The Takeaway

There is a truism that goes something like this: you need experience to develop good judgment and experience is gained by living through a lot of bad judgment! Judgment can cover a lot of ground, and you may feel that condensing it down to three commandments is optimistic. I would agree. Standish do an annual survey where they list the ten or more most popular factors for project failure, but in my look at PM judgment I am focusing on the PM as a factor in his own right. A possibly intuitive urge to conceal or ignore warning signs, to agree ill-advisedly to changes, or to provide and rely on ad hoc estimates, are three examples of misjudgment – I am sure there are more, please let me know your thoughts below.

In the discussion, I note that the PM is facing pressures, either because of the perceived urgency of the matter, the seniority of the other party, or the desire not to risk deteriorating relationships. To avoid bad judgment, I have given some universal advice, coupled with supporting techniques. But in responding to these pressured situations, always remember your role is significant. You are not a servant of the stakeholders, but in a position of weight and responsibility. Your job is successful project delivery, according to mandate and charter.

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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