

The Art of Project Management
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Adherence to checklists implies that there is a definitive process that guarantees a particular outcome, which is never the case. In reality, there are always just three things: a goal, a pile of work, and a bunch of people.

(1.6.1. Confusing process with goals)

In the film *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden says, "Sticking feathers up your butt does not make you a chicken." Writing a document with the word vision in the title doesn't mean you have a vision. You can have all the right meetings and use the right document templates and still miss the entire point of what vision documents should do. In the same sense that having the job title project leader doesn't magically make everything you do an act of leadership, calling something a vision document doesn't mean it will have the effects I've described previously.

4.7. A catalog of lame vision statements (which should be avoided)

If those things are important enough to be in the vision, they are important enough to enlist expert help in fleshing them out to the same precision and detail as technological goals. If claims such as "easy to use" are made, but no one has any expertise about ease of use, the team isn't set up to meet that goal. In producing the vision, leaders should be assessing what resources are needed to be successful and how resource and skill gaps will be filled (the choices are train, hire, change vision, or cross fingers).

4.8.1. Supporting vision statements and goals

Good visions are simple, goal driven, consolidated, inspirational, and memorable.

5.2. There are bad ideas

In fact, the space of good solutions for a problem is much smaller than the space of nonsolutions. Basic logic bears this out: if I ask you to climb Mount Everest, there are probably a handful of different routes that safely lead to the top. But if I ask you not to climb Mount Everest, you have an infinite number of ways to succeed (e.g., picking your nose, reading Dickens, climbing other mountains, climbing other mountains while picking your nose and reading Dickens, etc.). There are always more ways not to do something than there are to do it (a fact sure to generate much rejoicing among cynics and slackers everywhere).

5.3. Thinking in and out of boxes is OK

My fundamental point is this: do whatever you want with the box. Think in the box, out of the box, on the box, under the box, tear apart and make a fire out of the box, whatever, as long as you manage to solve the problems identified as the goals for the project. Make the boxes irrelevant in favor of understanding the problems, cultivating people's best creative energy, and aiming all the team's power in the same direction. As Thomas Edison said, "Hell, there are no rules here. We're trying to accomplish something." Make sure any rules you create serve the process and the people in it, not the other way around.

5.4. Good questions attract good ideas

"Computers are useless. They can only give you answers."
Pablo Picasso

6.2.2. Creative work has momentum

the creative momentum of a project is always stronger than inexperienced leaders and managers expect. The effort required to narrow down a pool of ideas into a single (good) design becomes much harder, and demands different skills, than they anticipated. [Figure 6-1](#) implies correctly that the time to close down a problem space should be as long as the time it took to grow it out. But the more innovative or creative the project is, the harder it is to estimate the time the problem space will need. This is because of the creative work's momentum.

6.4. How to consolidate ideas

A good and short description of using affinity diagrams to drive idea grouping and initial prioritization.

8.2.4. Sherlock Holmes, Occam's Razor, and reflection

The character Sherlock Holmes once said, "If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." And so it goes with decision making: if you eliminate the worst choices, whatever remains, however bad, must be your best choice. This is admittedly a cynical way to go about deciding things, but for tough decisions, eliminative logic may be the only way to turn the corner on the pressure you feel and gain momentum toward making a final decision.

Another tool to help narrow the possibilities is a principle known as Occam's Razor. William of Occam was a medieval philosopher in the 12th century who's credited with using the notion of simplicity to drive decisions. He believed that people often add complexity to situations even though it doesn't help to resolve them. He suggested that the best way to figure things out was to find the simplest explanation and use that first because, most of the time, it was the right explanation (i.e., in modern parlance, keep it simple, stupid).

But to apply Occam's Razor effectively, you need to take time to reflect. When you spend hours pounding away at the same issues, you eventually lose perspective. When all the choices start looking the same, it's time to get away. Go for a walk, get some coffee with a friend, or do anything to clear your mind and think about something else. You need to be able to look at the choices with a clear and fresh mind in order to make an effective decision, and you can't do that if you continue to stare at it all day.

8.3.3. Research as ammunition

The best defense against data manipulation and misinterpretation is direct communication between people. Talk to the person who wrote the report instead of just reading it. Avoid second-, third-, and fourth-hand information whenever possible. Talking to the expert directly often reveals details and nuances that are useful but were inappropriate for inclusion in a report or presentation. Instead of depending exclusively on that forwarded bit of email, call the programmer or marketer on the phone and get his opinion on the decision you're facing. There's always greater value in people than in information. The person writing the report learned 1,000 things she couldn't include in it but would now love to share with someone curious enough to ask.

8.3.4. Precision is not accuracy

As a last note about information and data, many of us forget the distinction between precision and accuracy. Precision is how specific a measurement is; accuracy is how close to reality a measurement is. Simply because we are offered a precise number (say, a work estimate of 5.273 days) doesn't mean it has any greater likelihood of being accurate than a fuzzier number (4 or 5 days). We tend to confuse precision and accuracy because we assume if someone has taken the time to figure out such a specific number, then the analysis should improve the odds that his estimation is good. The trap is that bogus precision is free. If I take a wild-assed guess (a.k.a. WAG) at next year's revenue (\$5.5 million), and another one for next year's expenses (\$2.35 million), I can combine them to produce a convincing-sounding profit projection: \$3.15 million. Precise? Yes. Accurate? Who knows. Without asking "How do you know this?" or "How was this data produced?", it's impossible to be sure if those decimal places represent accuracy or just precision. Make a habit of breaking other people's bad habits of misleading uses of precision.

8.4. The courage to decide

There is a big difference between knowing the right choice and making the right choice. Much of the time, any number of people can figure out what the right decision is, but very few will be willing to stand up and put themselves and their reputations behind it. You will always find more people willing to criticize and ridicule you for your decisions, than people willing to take on the responsibility and pressure to make the decision themselves. Always keep this in mind. Decision making is a courageous act. The best decisions for projects are often unpopular, will upset or disappoint some important people on the team, and will make you an easy target for blame if things go wrong.

Chapter Twelve. Why leadership is based on trust

This implies that to be a good leader, you do not need to be the best programmer, planner, architect, communicator, joke teller, designer, or anything else. All that is required is that you make trust an important thing to cultivate, and go out of your way to share it with the people around you. Therefore, to be a good leader, you must learn how to find, build, earn, and grant trust to others as well as learn how to cultivate trust in yourself.

12.3.1. Do not rely on granted power

The use of granted power as a primary force in leadership limits relationships. It excludes the possibility of exchanging ideas, and it places the focus on the use of force, rather than smarts. While there are situations when use of autocratic power is required, good leaders keep that sword in its scabbard as much as possible. As soon as you draw it, no one is listening to you anymore they're listening to the sword. Worse, everyone around you will draw their own swords to respond to yours. Instead of explaining to you why you are wrong, they will use their own granted power to challenge your power. This results in a competition of forces that has nothing to do with intelligence or a search for the best solution. Granted power (like the "dark side of the force") is tempting because it's easier: you don't have to work as hard to get what you want.

12.6.1. Leaders define their feedback process

The best leaders are the ones who take pleasure in the team being so committed to its intellectual standards that it's not afraid to question even the leader's behavior.

12.7. Trust and making mistakes

If you ask any wise masters of any discipline for their great lessons, they will tell stories about how they screwed something up, probably an important thing, and finally learned a better way to go about doing whatever it was. It follows that to become great, you not only need to make mistakes now and then, but you need someone to give you the opportunity to do so.

Trust in yourself is the core of leadership. Self-discovery is the way to learn who you are and to develop healthy self-reliance.

Chapter Thirteen. How to make things happen

Some people are able to apply their skills and talents in whatever combination necessary to move projects forward, and others cannot, even if they have the same or superior individual skills. The ability to make things happen is a combination of knowing how to be a catalyst or driver in a variety of different situations, and having the courage to do so.

13.2. Things happen when you say no

So, a fundamental law of the PM universe is this: if you can't say no, you can't manage a project.

14.4. Hitting moving targets

"No battle was ever won according to plan, but no battle was ever won without one."
Dwight D. Eisenhower

15.1.3. Why it gets worse

There is a basic psychological principle behind how most people go about prioritizing their work. All things being equal, people will tend to avoid doing things they don't want to do. This means that as the schedule progresses, the remaining work items or bug fixes will be the sad, unwanted tasks of the milestone.

At the end of milestones, people tend to be tired, frustrated, and stressed conditions that lead to poorer performance. Difficult bugs that fall between areas tend to circulate around a development team late in the schedule (a.k.a. bug hot potato). A programmer looks at one of these bugs, realizes it's a tough one, and feeling the pressure of his other work, assigns the bug to another person who could possibly take responsibility for it. As Weinberg writes, "...problems don't get solved, they merely circulate." Even the best programmers suffer these natural temptations from time to time.

15.5. Party time

Completing projects doesn't happen often in most lifetimes. Creating good things that other people will use in their lives is an incredible challenge. It's a time worthy of extraordinary celebration: live it up.