

How Project Management Keeps Me ^{Almost} Sane

by Tim Browne



“ Our teams need to celebrate each twist and turn on the journey. ”

Early in my management career I sat down with my boss and asked for help.

I had recently taken over the running of a busy and profitable centre and although results were tracking nicely, my team and I were exhausted. We were also, so I believed, ridiculously under resourced.

In my monthly catch-up meeting with my manager, I outlined the areas where we were stretched and barely coping. I then told him that I did not have enough people. I did not have enough time. I did not have enough budget. In essence – I did not have enough resources.

My manager's response was unexpectedly brief and to the point; “Good”.

I remember thinking “Good! Good! That wasn't the response I was after. Good! How is it good that I am under-resourced?”

The quizzical look on my face prompted my manager to elaborate.

“If there is ever a time when you do have enough people, time, money and resources then you are not doing enough. You would simply be coasting.”

His argument was both provocative and profound: You will never ever have enough resources if you are constantly looking to grow and improve what you do and deliver.

I wanted to grow, I wanted to be successful and so this conversation was the catalyst for me to take a look at the way I was managing my people and my own workload. If I was not going to get more resources I had to find better ways to deploy and manage them.

It was at this point I discovered the joyful art and science of project management.

Through the study, exploration and application of project management principles, I uncovered a simple secret: Project management works everyday. The tools and processes involved are not a mysterious formula that you should only use if you are building a bridge or rolling out a new program. Instead, the project management process contains heaps of practical ideas that can assist us to better manage the operational aspects of our jobs and our ever-increasing workloads.

And what's great about project management principles and tools is that

they are rigorous, robust and easily flex to fit most tasks and situations within our workplaces and lives.

If you are busy; if you want to get more return from those around you; if you want to re-establish a sense of peace and perspective to your own workload, then read on.

Here are just three of the powerful components of project management that I use on a daily or weekly basis to get the most out of my own precious resources.

Scope Discussions

Traditional project management teaches that when initially defining a project, the ‘scope discussion’ will explore what needs to be included in the project.

Clearly outlining the things that will and won't be done as part of a project helps prevent ‘scope creep’ whereby more and more is added to a project, which then contributes to it inevitably going over time and over budget.

Project managers have refined the critical skill of declaring what is ‘in scope’ and what is ‘out of scope’. As such they are some of the best people at managing other's expectations.

Any engineer quoting a job or project will tell you that it is just as important to outline what you won't be doing as it is what you will be doing.

This practice of ‘scope-discussions’ is a simple and powerful one to implement into other aspects of our roles at work. Many of my formal meetings and informal conversations with my colleagues or boss, result in me being asked to do additional tasks or take on mini-projects. As part of these conversations I have trained myself to always clarify what it is they want done, but also what they do not expect me to do.

For example, I was recently asked to explore a new replacement IT system and source three options. After agreeing I simply qualified the request by asking; “So you want three options that are compatible with our existing hardware but you don't need quotes, nor a full list of features, nor me to arrange demonstrations?” We then clarified

that we did need quotes and a brief overview of each solution. This quick ‘scope discussion’ both clarified expectations and saved me a whole heap of unnecessary work.

I read a quote recently that said; great leadership is not about saying “yes” but about learning to say “no”.

Deliverables

An ongoing challenge for all managers is how to motivate the troops. This is especially true for project teams working on extended projects spanning many months, if not years.

Within the project management context, a deliverable is defined as any tangible, verifiable outcome produced as a result of the project. These deliverables are not just seen at the conclusion of a project but materialise throughout its lifespan. Great project managers constantly highlight all the deliverables along the way, ensuring they celebrate with their team and communicate with key stakeholders.

Too often in our roles and lives we fixate on the end result, neglecting to notice the small wins along the way. Our teams need to celebrate each twist and turn on the journey, each mountain climbed and not just when we reach the finishing line.

If like me you chose to deprive yourself of many hours of sleep to watch Cadel Evans win the Tour de France last year, you will have realised that Cadel was in fact not the only winner. An event (project) like the Tour de France is not won by one person instead there are also many other winners: Team awards, ‘Best Young Rider’ award, ‘King of the Mountain’, most TV airplay, as well as the prestigious daily stage wins and valuable points at checkpoints along the way.

When you spend 21 days travelling 200km up mountains 2000m high, you need to find ways to motivate yourself and others to keep pedaling. The finish line is too far away, and besides, only one person crosses the line at the Champs De Elysess first.

QUOTES

Likewise, as managers, we need to identify key deliverables along our journey, celebrate accomplishing them with our team and then actively communicate the mini-achievements to our key stakeholders. No news is not good news. Instead, be bold, market your wins to your colleagues, boss and clients. Celebrate each mountain climb, each sprint and each stage of your race.

Sustainability

By its simple definition, any project must have a definitive beginning and a definitive end. Upon its completion a project will have changed something. This something will often require maintaining and sustaining into the future.

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The most successful and proactive project managers recognise that a project's legacy must live on without them in order to steer the ship. Through acknowledging their own temporal presence and importance on a project, the project manager defaults to implement a sustainable and scalable solution that neither relies on them personally, nor wastefully drains resources from the environment. They execute their job, they walk away and the outcomes remain.

Here I refer to the best bit of advice I was ever given by a manager: “The moment you step into a new role, take on a new task or start a new job – find someone to replace you!”

Too often I see leader's egos (including my own), get in the way of what is best for the client, the team or the long-term success of a business. We love to be involved, to feel needed and valuable. Yet the paradox in being so needed is that we eventually begin to whinge about being overwhelmed and overworked.

In a leadership position, constant fixing of problems and situations stifles creativity, stunts growth and ultimately creates a dependent

culture. Our goal should be to create an interdependent team, wherein our role is to facilitate sustainable outcomes, rather than fix problems.

Look at what you are currently doing in your role and ask yourself these two questions:

1. What do I do that **MUST** be done by me?
2. Who can I get to work alongside me on (some of) this to create a solution that's bigger than me?

The great reward that comes with this approach is it not only frees up your time but also allows you to explore more exciting or strategic aspects of your role.

In summary the key learnings from the art and science of project management are:

- Resources: If you recognise that you will never have enough resources and yet you have all you need, your focus will become clearer.
- Have a Scope Discussion: What can you honestly not do?
- Communicate your (many) Deliverables: What achievements do you want to celebrate?
- Think Sustainability: How do you ensure these outcomes live on without you and without draining the environment?



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“To change one's life: Start immediately. Do it flamboyantly. No exceptions.”

— William James

“Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry or savor their songs. One of our strongest weapons is dialogue.”

— Nelson Mandela

“People are just about as happy as they make their minds up to be.”

— Abraham Lincoln

“To be upset over what you don't have is to waste what you do have.”

— Ken Keyes Jr.

“The happiest people don't necessarily have the best of everything, they just make the most of everything that comes along their way.”

— Anonymous

“When things are desperate, there is no need to pretend that everything is beautiful. You have to accept reality. This has helped me come closer to reality.”

— The Dalai Lama