

Lighten Up

Another Irreverent Look at Project Management

Wayne Turk



In “Success in Project Management: The Lighten Up Approach” (*Defense AT&L*, November-December 2005), I presented some twisted and irreverent rules that apply to project management. Since then, others have provided more “rules,” and they have led to a second article. As in the first article, there is underlying truth in the rules as well as a look at the absurdity in what we do and how we think. Along with the smiles, the primary reason for the article is to remind PMs and their teams that being able to see the funny side is a necessity. Humor is a great stress reliever—and there is plenty of stress in project management; it helps us get past the unreasonable expectations, unrealistic schedules, unworkable budgets, scarce resources, and frequent crises that are part of most projects.

In a HUMOR Project (<www.humorproject.com>) article, Joel Goodman writes, “By using humor, we can prevent what I call a ‘hardening of the attitudes.’ If you stand rigidly in the face of stress, you are much more easily knocked off-balance. If you are flexible mentally, you are in a much better position to ‘roll with the punches’ that life throws you.”

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When things appear to be going well, you have overlooked something.

Let's start with some new rules.

No major project is ever completed on time, within budget, with the same staff that started it; nor does the project do all that it is supposed to do. It is highly unlikely that yours will be the first.

Not always true, but pretty close. The PM's critical concerns are if the project is on time, within budget, and doing what it is supposed to do. Expect changes and problems. Try to be the first to prove this rule wrong.

There is a related rule: *The benefits will be smaller than initially estimated—if estimates were made at all.*

Customers and PMs have to sell their project to get funding, so they often oversell the benefits, saying the project is a panacea for all problems. Realistic benefits analyses are few and far between, and, while I hate to say it, a realistic benefits analysis might kill many projects. Do the analysis and provide some realistic expectations. If it is a worthwhile project, it will survive scrutiny.

Any project can be estimated accurately once it's completed, but few are or can be estimated correctly beforehand.

You have to try. Just make sure that everything is taken into account. Of course, you also have to remember that the same work under the same conditions will be estimated differently by 10 different estimators or by one estimator at 10 different times.

Measurable benefits are real. Intangible benefits are not measurable, thus intangible benefits are not real.

Even though the intangible benefits may be great, there are no metrics to measure them; so when you mention them in your project briefing, be prepared for someone to ask about measuring them or to pooh-pooh your statement.

One advantage of fuzzy project objectives is that they let you avoid embarrassment in estimating the corresponding costs. Corollary: Fuzzy objectives are easier to accomplish. Keeping everything loose makes the PM's success rate



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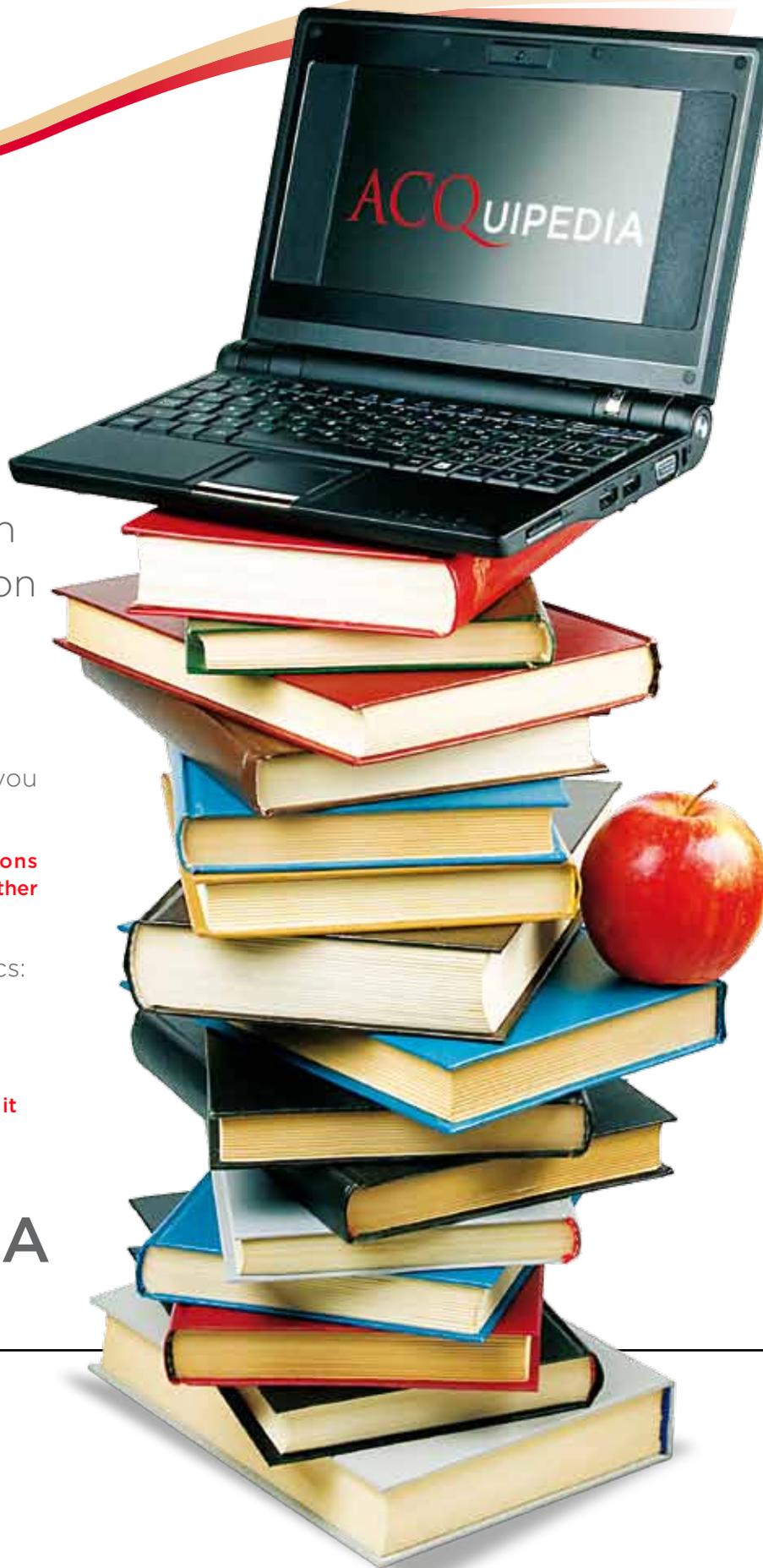
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much higher, but it is hard to get away with. In real life, most projects have objectives, and some are even clear. However, the projects and objectives don't have the clearly defined and stable requirements to go with them. That makes the budget and schedule calculations tenuous at best.

If project content is allowed to change freely, the rate of change will exceed the rate of progress.

The only kind of change that's not inevitable is change from a vending machine (OK, bad joke). Bad requirements and scope creep are two banes of a PM's existence. Most PMs would say that a change freeze is like Frosty the Snowman: a myth that melts when heat is applied. Try not to let others put the heat on to make changes. It makes your job much more difficult, if not impossible.

**You can take shortcuts and get the job done, but the bitterness of poor quality lingers long after the sweetness of meeting the due date is forgotten.
Don't take those shortcuts.**

However clearly you write a purpose statement and objectives, what you wrote and understand will be seen differently by everyone else. Corollary: Even if you think you have explained the purpose so clearly that no one could possibly misunderstand, someone will.

Good communication is an elusive goal, but you have to try, try, and keep trying.

A carelessly planned project will take three times longer to complete than expected. A carefully planned project will only take twice as long.

OK, that one is exaggerated; but if you don't plan carefully, it is a guarantee that you won't make the timeline. Good planning is critical to a project's success.

When the project is going well, something will go wrong (a version of Murphy's Law). Corollary: When things appear to be going well, you have overlooked something.

This is a plug for a good risk management program: It can help keep the PM out of trouble (or, at least, minimize the trouble).

Anyone who can work effectively on a project part-time certainly does not have enough to do now. Corollary: If the part-time team member has a time conflict, work assigned by the full-time boss will not suffer.

This doesn't mean that part-timers or matrixed personnel can't be a big help to a project, so use all of the resources available to you. But be aware of their limitations.

Users are often the people who tell you what they really want the day that you give them what they asked for originally.

Another way to say it is that the user does not know what he wants until he gets it, then he knows what he *doesn't* want. If users are involved from the start and all the way through, there's a smaller chance that will happen and a greater chance of project success.

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Don't take those shortcuts.

Now, for good measure, let's wrap up with some oldies but goodies.

- If anything can go wrong it will (Murphy's Law).
- If it can't possibly go wrong, it still will (O'Malley's corollary to Murphy's Law).
- Murphy and O'Malley are optimists (Zook's Law).
- When it goes wrong, it will do so in the worst possible way (Sod's Law).
- Work expands to fill the time available for its completion (Parkinson's Law).
- A two-year project will take three years; a three-year project will never finish (Turk's Law).
- The more time you spend in reporting on what you are doing, the less time you have to do anything. Stability is achieved when you spend all your time doing nothing but reporting on the nothing you are doing (Cohn's Law).
- Project managers will not get the staff they need as long as they succeed through overtime, ulcers, and super-human effort. Only when deadlines are missed will senior management approve the staff who, had they been available at the outset, would have prevented the missed deadlines (Woehlke's Law).
- There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new (Niccolò Machiavelli's Law, c.1505).

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