

Success in Project Management

The Lighten Up Approach

Wayne Turk

Project managers as a group seem to take themselves way too seriously. That's understandable. They have to deal with unreasonable expectations, unrealistic schedules, unworkable budgets, too few resources and crises that seem to pop up on a daily basis. You have to question why anyone would want the job and the stress level that goes with it. One way to deal with that stress, though, is to add a little bit of humor.

Joel Goodman, in one of a number of articles from the HUMOR Project <www.humorproject.com>, points out that you need to take your job seriously ... and take your-

self lightly. He quotes Don Seibert, former chief executive officer and chairman of the board of JCPenney, as saying, "Humor helps you to keep your head clear when you're dealing in highly technical information or difficult decisions where choices aren't that clear." That last part sounds like a typical part of project management to me.

Goodman also says, "You can be a serious professional without being a solemn professional." To illustrate this, he quotes the very successful former manager of the New York Yankees, Casey Stengel. When asked his secret for winning, Casey replied, "The secret of managing is to keep the five guys who hate you away from the four ... who are undecided." Goodman emphasizes that humor can help us to survive—and thrive—at work. I think he's right.

In over 30 years of management experience, I've seen that humor can be a life-saver and even a career saver. Once I lightened up and added a sense of humor, it made a world of difference to my attitude and my health. During my career, I've also collected a few humorous (all right, twisted) rules concerning project management that have helped me keep a sometimes irreverent attitude toward my chosen field. There could be an ounce or two of truth in them.

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JOEL GOODMAN
THE HUMOR
PROJECT

The Rules of the Game

Mistakes are going to happen on your project, so:

- Never make the same mistake twice in succession. Always make at least one intervening mistake.

Which leads to the corollary:

- When your goal is to keep from repeating a mistake, you are sure to make a doozie.

Turk is a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and a manager with SRA International supporting National Guard Bureau information technology projects and distance learning classrooms. He has managed projects for DoD, other federal agencies, and non-profit organizations and is a frequent contributor to Defense AT&L.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPES

Here is a story that project managers might want to remember. It's about the three-envelope method of management and problem resolution.

A new PM took over a program. When he showed up, there were three envelopes and a note on his desk. The note, from the previous PM, said, "You will probably run into problems. When you are really stuck for an answer, open envelope number 1."

The new PM wondered, but put away the envelopes. Sure enough, after a few months, a significant problem came up. He remembered the envelopes and opened the first one. The note inside read, "Blame your predecessor. When the next major problem arises, open envelope number 2."

He went to his boss, explained the problem, blamed it on his predecessor, made some changes, and moved on.

After a few more months, another problem arose that was worse than the first, so he opened envelope number 2. The note said, "Reorganize." So he did a reorganization of the project and, sure enough, that fixed the problem.

Our PM was feeling pretty good for a while, but eventually more problems surfaced. The envelopes had done the trick before, so he opened number 3. And it said ...

"Prepare three envelopes."



And when you've made that doozie of a mistake, there is another rule:

- Carry bad news to the boss the day that his promotion is announced. (Don't you wish you could always time it that well?)

There are many articles written about standardization, processes, rules for success, and similar things that could make people believe there is a cookie-cutter approach to project management that will always lead to success. Not true: There is no single approach that guarantees success. In the real world—versus the world of management theory and advice—there are rules concerning projects that you might want to remember.

- Twins occur in one out of every 93 births in humans, but never with projects.

If you try to mimic the last successful project, you are destined to be a chapter in a Lessons Learned book.

You don't want to be held up as a bad example, so treat each project as an individual, unique entity. Yes, there are general concepts and guidelines for every project, but

each project is different, with different people involved, different planned outcomes, and different problems. Be careful about treating all projects the same or you might end up as the point of a Dilbert comic strip.

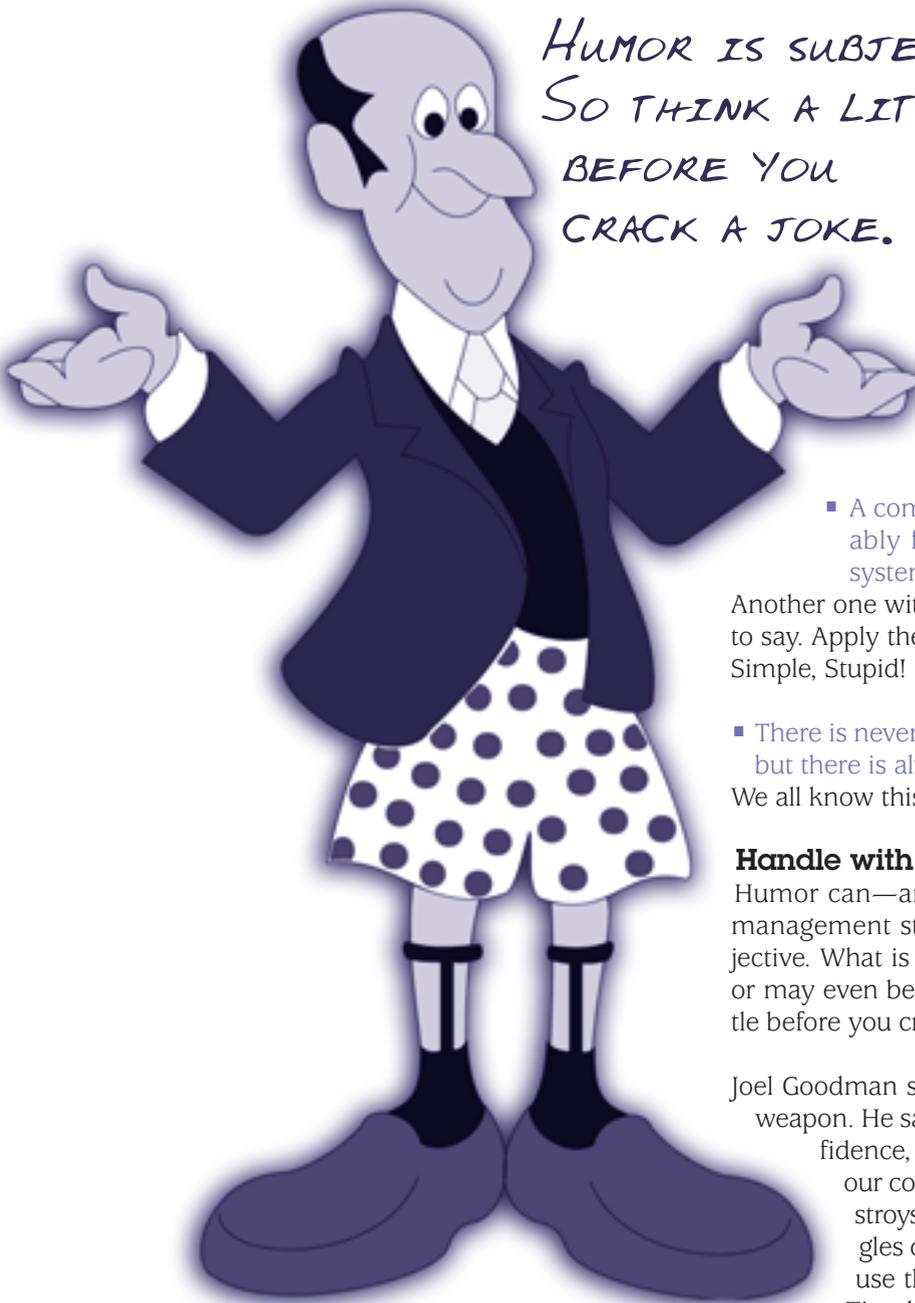
- Two of something that you cannot use is NOT better than one of something that you cannot use.

It happens all of the time when users aren't involved in the requirements process from the beginning through the testing and deployment. That's like the old joke about a retailer losing money on every product he sells but making up for it in volume. Make sure that you design what a user needs.

- It is easy to meet a Mean Time Between Failures requirement if you leave it broken. (Of course you might have to explain some availability problems.)

A lighthearted way of saying not to bend your ethics or take shortcuts to meet a requirement.

- Users are sometimes nervous about flying, floating, or driving in something when all parts are built by the lowest bidder.



*HUMOR IS SUBJECTIVE. ...
SO THINK A LITTLE
BEFORE YOU
CRACK A JOKE.*

- Whatever happens, behave as though you meant it to happen.

Confidence and a cool facade will fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, to paraphrase old Abe. And that buys you some time to fix things.

- The first place to look for information is in the section of the manual where you least expect to find it. Ain't it the truth? So don't write the manuals for your project that way.

- A complex system that doesn't work is invariably found to have evolved from a simpler system that worked just fine.

Another one with more than a grain of truth, I am sorry to say. Apply the KISS factor whenever possible: Keep It Simple, Stupid!

- There is never enough time to do it right the first time, but there is always enough time to do it over. We all know this one. Try not to apply it to your project.

Handle with Care

Humor can—and probably should—be a part of your management style. A warning, though: Humor is subjective. What is funny to one person may not be funny, or may even be objectionable, to another. So think a little before you crack a joke.

Joel Goodman suggests using humor as a tool, not as a weapon. He says that “laughing with others builds confidence, brings people together, and pokes fun at our common dilemmas. Laughing at others destroys confidence, ruptures teamwork, and singles out individuals or groups as the ‘butt.’” So use the AT&T test: is the humor Appropriate, Timely, and Tasteful? If so, you can probably reach out and touch people positively with it.

I guess that we might want to consider quality and past performance in choosing contractors. But we always do that anyway, right?

- Don't assume that the train moved just because you blew the whistle ... unless, of course, you are the client. I think that I had better not add any comments to that, but it does marry up closely with the next one, which is the primary rule of project management:

- The Golden Rule—He who has the gold makes the rules.

Here are a few other random rules and thoughts to go with them:

There's a big payoff to smiling and laughing as you tackle those unreasonable expectations, unrealistic schedules, unworkable budgets, too few resources, and crises that seem to pop up on a daily basis. Humor reduces stress, which often makes difficult situations easier to figure out, and it also helps you live a longer, healthier life.

The author welcomes comments and questions. He can be contacted at wayne_turk@sra.com.