

An Uncommon Attribute

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**com · mon sense
(noun):
sound and
prudent
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**Merriam-Webster
OnLine**

Common sense in a project management role is knowing how much money you have for a project and how much you have spent. It's having good, stable requirements. It's assigning the right people to the tasks. Setting a realistic schedule. Having the right tools for the job. It's planning. It's testing. The list could go on and on. However, common sense frequently goes out the window when well-intentioned but over-stringent, unworkable regulations or inflexible processes are set in place to be blindly followed. It falters under pressure from above and slips when desires replace realism.

Merriam-Webster OnLine at < www.merriam-webster.com > defines common sense as "sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts." The most important words in that definition are "sound and prudent judgment." They're words that every project manager should mount on the wall in front of his desk or tattoo on her forehead so that they aren't forgotten. (OK, you don't have to tattoo them on your forehead, but don't forget them.)

Some readers are probably thinking to themselves that common sense is all well and good, but it is frequently wrong. Common sense can be an impediment to abstract or logical thinking. It can be counterintuitive. This is especially true in math and physics. Human intuition can conflict with real-world results. It's like the plant in one of the Harry Potter books that traps Harry and his two friends; the more that they struggle, the tighter it holds them. When they relax, it lets go, like the Chinese finger trap puzzle.

There is an old saying that "common sense is an uncommon attribute." Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* puts it a little differently. He says that "common sense is not commonly practiced." When it comes to project management, I hate to admit it, but it is too often true. We sometimes do some really dumb things.

But what is common sense? We all "know" what it is and how it is manifested. On an individual basis, common sense is knowing when to come in out of the rain, why the early bird gets the worm, and that life isn't always fair. It's simple, sound financial policies: Don't spend more than you earn. It is reliable parenting strategies: The adults, not the kids, are in charge (which applies to managing, too).

Albert Einstein said, "Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen." Probably true, but it is also the acquired wisdom of experience. We've seen what works with management, and what doesn't. So while there are exceptions, I will continue down the path of advocating commonsense solutions. Common sense is more often right than wrong.

Defense AT&L authors Dan Ward, Chris Quaid, and Gabe Mounce, in a series of articles over the past several years, have advocated what they call FIST—fast, inexpensive, simple, and tiny—as a guideline for projects. I couldn't agree more and recommend people reread their articles (particularly "FIST," *Defense AT&L*, March-April 2006 and "FIST, Part 5," *Defense AT&L*, May-June 2006). There was

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an uncommon amount of plain old common sense advocated in those articles, although the actual term may not have been used. The brand of common sense advocated by Ward et al., goes against some commonly accepted ways of running projects in the government. But who said that the government always uses common sense? Just because we've always done something one way, doesn't mean it is the best way.

That is part of the "prudent" mentioned earlier. We have to think about how we do things, how we solve problems, and how to get the best results. Taking the time to think things through before rushing into action can pay large dividends. That is especially true if the process or action seems to go counter to common sense.

A Lack of Common Sense

Let's look at a couple of examples that fail the common sense test. The project is small, the total allotted for the project is only 400 hours, resources are five people, and the timeline is a month to complete the job. It is ludicrous if the project has to meet process requirements to develop a large document or set of documents like a full project management plan, configuration management plan, quality assurance plan, etc.

Another example: An organization puts out a request for proposal. The bids come in, but none is within the expected range. Are the contractors greedy? Was the government estimate wrong? Were the requirements solid and understandable? Was there an unrealistic schedule? Most of the time, it's one of the last three reasons, and it's because there was a rush to get the RFP out the door before determining a good set of realistic requirements and a schedule to match. Common sense says that if we have good, logical, workable requirements, we can get reasonable bids and ultimately, a successful project. Sure, we can all think of projects with good requirements that didn't get good bids or failed in the long run. But those are the exceptions, and exceptions happen. Common sense helps minimize the exceptions.

Common Sense Recommendations

Below are some brief recommendations that are based on a common sense approach to project management. They are not new and they are not rocket science (unless your project happens to involve rockets).

Good Requirements

Gather, prioritize, coordinate, and validate the requirements for the project. Without good requirements, you don't know what you are building or if it will be usable when you finish.

Involve the Users

Having the users involved from the beginning helps get those good requirements. In fact, having them in-

involved throughout makes good sense. Ensure all levels of end users are involved. They have the kind of input that you need to put out the products that are required—input that can save you a lot of wasted effort and money.

Minimize Scope Creep

Minimizing change makes sense on many levels. Scope creep and changing requirements can be slow poison. A simple change here can lead to another there until the project is in deep trouble, and the final product bears only a faint resemblance to what was originally planned. Schedule slips and cost overruns are the results. Try for stable requirements and no changes. Flexibility is needed, though, especially with a long project. Needs change, as does technology. Vendors come and go. Budgets wax and wane. Customers and their level of support may be in flux. All of these happen, and you must accept some change, but keeping requirements changes to a minimum makes the best sense.

Realistic Schedule

Develop a realistic schedule with milestones. There should be both short- and long-term goals. Keep the schedule visible to all so that the team members know what they are working toward and the current status. Keep the milestones measurable, and keep the timeframe short (no more than three to four weeks apart is a good guide). In a very short duration project, the spacing can be even tighter, and that may be critical if you have short-term deliverables and a compressed development cycle. Short times between milestones means faster recovery if there are problems.

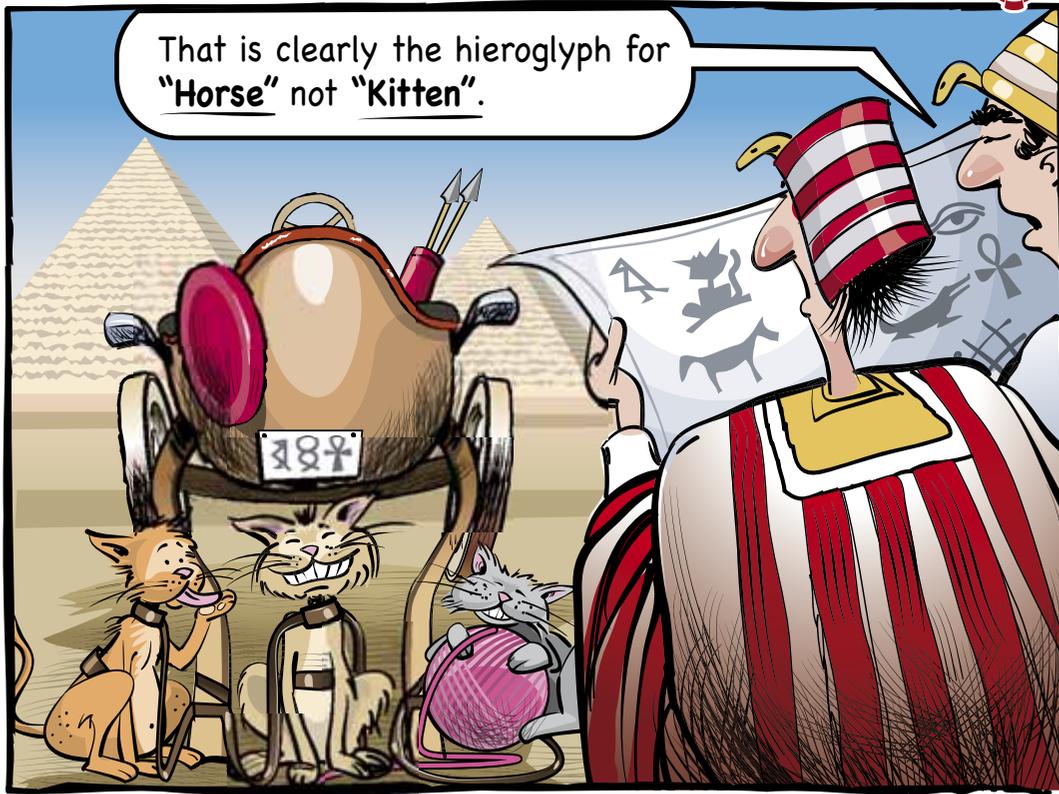
Good Communication

Communication may be the most important part of project management. It makes good common sense to ensure that everyone is aware of what is going on. Communicate up the chain, with your peers, and with your team. Keep your boss informed of the good and the bad on a regular basis. Communicate what is happening to the team and get them to communicate with you. Give them feedback on their work and on the project status and plans. Keep them informed about what changes are occurring and why. And communicate with others outside your organization who need to be kept in the know. Don't let people feel like mushrooms—kept in the dark, fed manure, and expected to grow and prosper.

Good Planning

Another critical bit of common sense is good planning. Plan out what will be done and how. Most projects have required plans as deliverable. It is not an exercise that can be skipped. Prioritize actions and deliverables to keep a team tightly focused. Publicize the plans. That ensures everyone understands how the project will be accomplished.

GREAT MOMENTS IN ACQUISITION HISTORY



1600 BC: Egyptian chariot engineers discover the importance of design reviews.

Problem Resolution

Develop a problem-resolution process. There *will* be problems. They may be technical, equipment-related, differences of opinions, or personnel issues. Having a process to resolve problems can save you headaches. And the “process” of having you, the manager, resolve all of the problems is not the best way to do it.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is considered a pain in the neck or a hindrance by some managers. That may be true in some cases, but a good quality assurance program means better products and fewer problems in the long run. The quality assurance process requires the use of common sense, too. It must focus on the important, not the trivial—not always easy to enforce.

Risk Management

A good risk management process to identify and mitigate risks is another commonsense necessity. If you don’t have a good risk management program, you won’t see the problems coming. And if you don’t see them coming, how can you plan to handle them? Identify in advance

the risks that could have a negative impact on the project and diligently work to find strategies to overcome, bypass, resolve, or mitigate those risks.

Comprehensive Testing

Adequate and timely testing with good test plans makes for good products and prevents major problems in the field. If you really want to know if your project is working, grab a user and give him or her a chance to try the product. The people who are going to be using the product are the best to test it.

Standardization

Standardizing terminology, data elements, and processes is something else that will pay off. Standardization gets everyone singing from the same sheet of music, to use a cliché. That is a part of configuration management. Ensuring that the same versions of software, documents, plans, and schedules are used by everyone makes sense.

Repeatable Processes

Employ good, repeatable, but flexible processes. Processes set the structure, framework, and baseline for a project.



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Knowing that things are done the same way every time gives the team and customer confidence that nothing is missed and that the results are trustworthy, useful, and usable. Good processes keep you out of trouble, but following bad processes or processes that don't fit the project makes no sense.

Delegate

Writing down tasks and delegating them can keep tasks from falling through the cracks. If they are written down, they aren't forgotten. And it makes sense to delegate to the appropriate person or team. A project manager cannot, and should not, try to do it all. Use the team approach whenever possible.

A small-team approach to tasks helps with flexibility. It can also cut down on the minutiae that the PM would normally deal with. Even if it is a large project, the small-team approach works well. However, PMs must empower task leads to manage within their areas of responsibility. Keep communication lines open. Try to meet formally with task leads on a regular basis to review and measure against milestones. It is not a bad idea to talk daily with them on an informal basis. Frequent interaction and open communication can head off possible problems as early as possible.

Metrics

Use the Earned Value Management System and other metrics to tell how the project is progressing. Common sense says that if we know where we are, how much we've spent, how much is left, and what we have accomplished, we stand a better chance of being successful. You can't improve if you don't measure. Develop metrics to find out what is going right, where you can optimize, or where you need to devote extra attention

Budgeting

Firm and consistent budgeting leads to more successful projects. The time and effort wasted on annual budget justification can have a severe impact on a project. That's a sore point with many of us. The current government methodology for funding projects doesn't meet the common sense test in most cases and needs improvement. This article doesn't provide the answer, but there are people working on it. Luckily some projects *are* funded in ways that do make sense, but most aren't.

It All Comes Down to Common Sense

In all my previous articles in *Defense AT&L*, I've tried to take a common sense approach to various aspects of project management. Common sense simply means being efficient, using the right resources for the job, and having a product that meets the needs of the user. In this time of turmoil and tight budgets, common sense is more important than ever.

Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*, the pamphlet urging the colonies to break away from England, said that "the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind," and that's still true today. No matter what your beliefs are about Iraq, Afghanistan, or the United States as the world's policeman, we all need to do our part for our warfighters. We need to get them the right products in a cost-efficient and timely manner. That means using the best processes and the right resources, and getting the best results on DoD projects. It means using a little common sense.

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