

## Lessons Learned – a Firefighter’s Guide

How can we dance when our earth is turning  
How do we sleep when our beds are burning  
Midnight Oil

There is an abundance of information on Lessons Learned / Lessons to Share / Learning from Experience available in the public domain, but these tend to concentrate on ‘doing things properly’ in an environment that probably smells slightly of lavender. Who actually ‘learns lessons’ anyway? How many times have you heard the sound bite “Lessons will be learned and we will ensure that <insert platitude here>” on television as yet another spokesperson is wheeled out to explain some system foul up? And you just know nothing will really change.... So, if you want to get your project delivered as you see fit with minimum interference from ‘those who know better’, take note of the following lessons learned from a seasoned project manager-come-firefighter who has ‘been there and done that’.

### Issues Management:

Issues resolution is one of the main perks of the job. Why waste time on boring risk management activities (see below) when you can spend time doing the sexy stuff? Just operate in a rolling 3 month window and tackle issues as they arise – consider it rolling wave planning for the real world. If you have to report issues status in progress reviews then use a traffic light system as it’s a fair bet that there is no real consistency of use for red, amber and green status between projects – subjectivity rules ok and one person’s red is another person’s amber. And try not to allocate a red status to an issue as this may attract Senior Management attention – I say ‘may’ as there probably won’t be documented guidance on how issues need to be escalated within the project hierarchy. Oh, and class most issues as amber to show that your project is not a breeze. Remember that there is no such thing as bad publicity; standing up in front of Senior Management showing how you battle against the Forces of Evil (aka Suppliers, Customers) to resolve issues is far more beneficial to your career than ensuring issues do not occur by following good risk / stakeholder / schedule management. Project managers who follow good practice and deliver to plan stay below the radar and will probably get an average appraisal performance rating because Senior Management view their projects as neither complex nor challenging.

### Supplier Management:

If you are lucky then you will be responsible for managing Suppliers – these are a good source of issues, especially if you do not have a shared risk register. Everyone knows that most Suppliers are difficult so don’t spend excessive time trying to build ‘a relationship’ – you can always blame them if things go belly up, after all they need to earn their keep. Management of Suppliers will also involve travel - a good excuse to get out of the office on a regular basis. If you are lucky you’ll turn up at a Supplier and find that someone from another function (e.g. Supply Chain, Commercial, Quality, Business Development) are also visiting at the same time - more often than not to discuss your project - so you won’t be Johnny-No-Mates at the hotel bar. Luckily you never seem to have to provide formal justification to Senior Management as to why you are travelling to Suppliers or to have to provide any feedback report – a few words during the weekly progress meeting (or by the coffee machine) will normally suffice. And don’t rock the boat for the guys & gals in the other functions who also like some time from the normal office grind as you never know when you may need their support to back you up to confirm how bad a certain Supplier is performing.

### Risk Management:

You will probably have to undertake some risk management activities but just do the bare minimum to keep the Process Police at bay. Is there anything more boring than reviewing risks in a database month-on-month? I don't normally turn up for these diarised meetings and just pay lip service to reviewing and updating the risk mitigation actions. Some project managers identify their risks in the project schedule and carry out CPA and SRA but I've never been trained to do this. I've heard that the project management tools we have involve a lot of exporting data / manual manipulation in spreadsheets to get anything useful generated, so why bother? In my opinion the effort you would spend to carry out Full Monty risk management is probably equivalent to the cost of resolving issues (aka risks that have occurred) and not as interesting. And it's not as if risk slides presented in project progress reviews get any real attention from Senior Management – it's not only project managers who like a good deep dive into a current issue or two. Remember, carrying out risk management may result in you having to go cap-in-hand to request release of risk contingency that Senior Management view as additional margin – not a good career-enhancing move.

### Budget Estimation:

Whatever you do, don't get involved in the bid team tasked with compiling the estimates for a future project if you are in the running to manage the project should you win the contract. You are off to a head start if you are handed a budget that you had no involvement in deriving – everyone knows that there is never enough time at the bid phase to compile quality estimates, so you will have a good excuse for not delivering within your allocated budget. And any negotiations carried out with the Customer between bid submission and contract award are not usually documented sufficiently to allow traceability of cost deltas. Didn't the Chaos Report from the Standish Group state that 52.7% of projects cost 189% of their original estimates? You would just be in the majority of project managers who didn't deliver to plan.

### Scope Management:

Best left to engineers. They may not be trained in PBS / WBS / OBS / CBS techniques but they usually do a good job of analysing compliance to requirements to the n<sup>th</sup> degree. This could result in over-engineering and cost overrun / schedule slip, but this is usually the norm so you won't get too badly bruised if things go pear shaped. And don't, whatever you do, flow down any budget responsibility to project team leads – keep it all under your control even if you don't have time to monitor their performance. You can probably use the excuse that they have not been trained in monitoring and control techniques but, if they have, could question any 'sporty' budget that you allocate them.

### Schedule Management:

This is another activity that has the potential to create a lot of unnecessary work. So engineers may have come up with some structured way of articulating the activities that need to be carried out on your project. My tip is to make sure that your schedule makes copious use of hammock tasks so that you do not have to track performance against multiple detailed tasks. Engineers usually have their own way of tracking performance – spread sheets, 'to do' lists, maybe even schedules – so a quick session with them every month to get %age work completed will suffice, even if their schedules are not checked to ensure consistency with yours. And don't use a Project Controller to develop and maintain your schedule. They will probably question your approach and will want a fully resourced, linked schedule that has been run though a 'schedule goodness' tool. And they will want to develop a CPN and carry out SRA to better understand the confidence of delivering to plan. This expertise and analysis will cost you money, which will be better spent doing other less speculative activities

in your project. It's not as if this level of analysis is normally required by Senior Management anyway.

#### Earned Value Management:

If your Customer does not require EV reporting, stay well clear of EVM. I've already provided my thoughts on scope and schedule management – none of these lessons learned will be of value to you if you choose to do EVM on your project. However, if you are unlucky enough to have EVM forced on you, there are still some 'get out of jail' cards you can play to ensure you are not held to account for the EV reports that pop out of your Company's chosen toolset. The #1 card is that Senior Management will probably not have been trained to understand what the EV reports are telling them. That should come as no surprise because it's a fair bet that you and most of the project team will probably be in the same boat. Combine this with; lack of understanding of EV techniques to measure performance, an EV toolset that requires a lot of manual data manipulation and is only available to the chosen few, and lack of quality time to analyse the EV reports even if you wanted, and you have little cause to worry.

#### Benefits Management:

To be honest, I wouldn't devote much time to this. You may have to complete a benefits management section in the Project Management Plan but you can usually get away with a table listing a few benefits to your organisation and some presumed benefits to the Customer following project delivery. I have yet to see a pragmatic framework to allow you to map key performance indicators to benefits via deliverables and outcomes, and as internal project and governance reviews don't usually require any presentation on the realisation of benefits then you probably won't have to revisit them. While Senior Management (especially on projects delivering to a set of detailed requirements) continue to see no need to define benefits and track them as the project progresses then this paradigm should continue for the foreseeable future, especially if there is no demand from the Customer community.

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Hopefully you have realised that the suggestions given above were intended to highlight unsatisfactory behaviours that a project manager should not adopt or promote while managing a project, countered by some examples of both barriers to success and good practice. If you do work in an organisation that promotes a 'firefighting' culture - resolving issues over a tactical near-term rolling window rather than spending some quality time forecasting future performance and understanding the risks to delivering to cost, quality and time constraints – it is all too easy to just 'go with the flow'. However by actively striving to break down the barriers to adopting good practice you will set up a framework for your organisation to succeed and will prevent yourself becoming Pugh, Pugh, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble or Grub.

