

Three Not-so-lazy Articles from Peter Taylor

by our favorite World Congress Emcee and Lazy Project Manager, Peter Taylor

Editor's note: Peter was the Emcee (or "host") at the IPMA World Congress, in Dubrovnik, Croatia. We've worked with Peter for almost five years, but this was the first time we've met. We'd recommend Peter Taylor as your event's speaker or host any time!

1. A new executive view

I saw something for the very first time the other day, and it was one of those 'why on earth have I never seen this before it is so obvious...' moments.

There is some background to this I have to admit; I have a new book out called 'Strategies for Project Sponsorship' (Management Concepts Press) written with two fellow authors, Ron Rosenhead and Vicki James. As a result of this I am tending to think 'sponsors' at every occasion and this one was no different.

I was reviewing a portfolio dashboard at a software vendor and they, as I have seen many times in the past in many systems, offered me views by project manager, business unit, location, value, phase and so on. But then I asked, and was delighted to see (after a simple sort edit) a view of the portfolio by... yes, you guessed it, by sponsor.

And why not?

Portfolio management should be much more than just a prioritisation of projects and resources exercise. It should be the representation in projects (and programs) of the competitive strategy that will allow business executives to convert their intentions into reality.

So this is pretty serious stuff then.

All of this is placed in the hands of project managers, and they need to be held to task and held accountable but in the words of Standish 'The most important person in the project is the executive sponsor. The executive sponsor is ultimately responsible for the success and failure of the project¹.'

So to me, these days anyway, for the executive team to be able to view their portfolio also by project sponsor and to see who of these 'ultimately responsible' people are performing (and who are not, thereby putting the business strategy at risk) should be a 'no-brainer'.

When it comes to financial accountability, it seems—at least anecdotally—that projects often go over budget, deliver late, and deliver less than was expected . . . and there are absolutely no significant consequences at sponsor level. No one appears to be accountable and no one gets removed.

¹ ©2012 CHAOS Manifesto: The Year of the Executive Sponsor (Standish) 2012

Now, if something goes wrong in the ‘real’ side of the business—sales down, profits falling, share price dropping—then it seems like something will be done and someone will be held accountable. Maybe this is because this is seen as ‘real’ business and ‘real’ work and as such has to be taken seriously.

Project sponsorship needs the same strength of focus and importance of status. The success or failure of a project is a direct reflection on the sponsor as the keeper of the organisational vision.

A ‘sponsor’ view of the project portfolio is an absolute key to this in the future I believe.

Executives; demand this today!

2. PMOs are there to make life better – for PMs and for the business

Marissa Mayer, the new CEO of Yahoo, tasked with rescuing this once mighty company, has done many things in her first few months in charge including the creation of ‘PB&J’.

A play on the ‘peanut butter and jelly’ much loved in the US she’s cut away ribbons of red tape and instituted an internal online service called ‘PB&J’ which actually stands for ‘Process, Bureaucracy, and Jams’. This service allows employees to complain about organisational blockages and excessive overheads that slow action and decision making.

I have spoken many times on the fact that a successful PMO should be a ‘balanced’ PMO and this includes getting the balance right between people and process. Both are critical to project success and both come under the remit of the PMO.

But it is the responsibility of the PMO to ‘make life better’ for the people – the project managers, so that they can effectively and efficiently do their jobs - and for the business, so that the projects are seen to be under control and delivering benefits.

Often one of the first tasks I get involved in when helping a company develop a PMO and associated project management practice is to review the method or framework that they use to guide their project managers. And in many cases it is often a need to add in quality reviews and some control points or stages to improve the control. But it is always a concern that anything added should add proportional value – quality assurance should deliver quality (and not be a burdensome universally hated overhead that delivers no real benefit to anyone).

One way to do this is to think carefully when you design such a process.

The other is to make sure that you have a ‘PB&J’ in place for the PMO team to let you know when you have got it wrong.

3. Lessons Learned: Why don’t we learn from them?

The question that is often asked amongst many of us in project management is ‘why didn’t we learn from that experience?’

Albert Einstein said ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.’

So why do we accept 'insanity' as the path of project management?

The next time you are in a meeting just try this out. Whether you are presenting or someone else it doesn't matter but what happens when the inevitable happens, you go to write something on the flipchart or the whiteboard and the pen is dry.

How many of you (and I freely admit I am just as guilty) put the pen down on the rack again, pick up another one and carry on with the key, interesting, important point you were making. Thereby leaving the same dry pen for the next person – or worse, for yourself to do the same thing again a little later in the meeting.

Did you expect the pen to magically refill itself? Of course not, madness!

Did you put the pen in the bin and ensure that a new one was put in its place, or at least noted for someone that new pens were required? Of course not, madness!

A simple lesson in lessons learned, or the process of not learning to be more precise.

So are we programmed to not learn lessons?

Clearly not, if that was the case then we would have wiped ourselves out as a race a long long long time ago.

So why don't we learn lessons when it comes to project experiences?

Well I think that in actual fact we do, or personally we do. Our personal project experience has to be a learning experience (even if that learning experience is 'I am getting out of project management and finding a real job to do...').

No, we do learn and we do progress and grow as project managers and we are all the better for it.

The challenge comes from sharing the knowledge of those lessons amongst others, and in learning from others experience in return. It is a matter of scale and capability all mixed in with time and priorities.

It is not the process of binning the empty pen and replacing the pen but in letting others know what and why you did that and how it can benefit them in the future and why they should also pass on this piece of knowledge.

It is less 'lessons learned' than 'lessons shared'.

So the next time you go to write something on the flipchart or the whiteboard and the pen is dry stop – turn to face your audience and say 'Right this pen is going in the bin and let me tell you why ...'

About Our Author



Speaker: Author: Trainer: Coach: Consultant

Peter Taylor is the author of two best-selling books on ‘Productive Laziness’ – ‘*The Lazy Winner*’ and ‘*The Lazy Project Manager*’.

In the last 3 years he has focused on writing and lecturing with over 200 presentations around the world in over 20 countries and with new books out including ‘*The Lazy Project Manager and the Project from Hell*’, ‘*Strategies for Project Sponsorship*’, ‘*Leading Successful PMOs*’, and ‘*The Thirty-Six Stratagems: A Modern Interpretation of a Strategy Classic*’ and ‘*The Project Manager Who Smiled*’.

He has been described as ‘perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today’ and he also acts as an independent consultant working with some of the major organizations in the world coaching executive sponsors, PMO leaders and project managers.

His mission is to teach as many people as possible that it is achievable to ‘work smarter and not harder’ and to still gain success in the battle of the work/life balance.

More information can be found at www.thelazyprojectmanager.com and www.thelazywinner.com – and through his free podcasts in iTunes.

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