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Project Management and the Alien Encounter

by Peter Taylor, The Lazy Project Manager; PMO Director at Siemens PLM Software

I suspect that you will all know this story:

Six blind men were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of the elephant's body.

The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; the one who feels the ear says the elephant is like a hand fan; the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall; and the one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe.

A wise man explains to them: 'All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all the features you mentioned'.

This is a good story which shows that to explain and understand something that is complex requires the full picture. Each of the blind men was correct but together they had the greater understanding.

Through a number of LinkedIn discussions I asked the following question:

'We all know the terms of definition for project management but, to get outsiders to understand what we do, how would you simply describe project management to someone who has no idea what it is.'

Now it may just be me – but I am pretty sure it isn't – people outside of project management don't get project management. My family have no idea what I really do and here's a test, ask any project manager you know to answer one simple question. They must answer quickly, no thinking time; just respond! OK. Look them in the eye and ask them 'what does a project manager do?' – I bet half them will mumble something along the lines of 'they manage projects ...'

Not very helpful.

So back to the 'alien encounter' and I feel that we need to get a few things out of the way here. Naturally as expected people responded with comments ranging from 'If an alien arrived here from outer space then they probably know more about project management than we do' – a fair point – to a comment written in 'Klingon' (and thank you to another contributor who sent me a translation) – and of course the classic 'I thought that project managers were aliens' – very good and 'no' but the sponsors could well be.

So here are some of the good suggestions along with some of my comments (and I of course thank all of you who submitted ideas):

'Making sure that it doesn't cost you more and take longer than planned to do something all the while anticipating any adverse conditions or obstacles that may stop you from achieving your goals and planning how to overcome those if they occur.'

The Lazy Project Manager

Productive Laziness



Coordinating people to do the different activities as they occur and making sure that we achieve the end goal. Actually when I explain it in simple terms like this people look at me as if to say well that doesn't sound very hard surely anyone can do that!

[Lesson: Describing things in a simple way may make them appear simple to do.]

‘A way of reducing the pain’

[This makes us sound like a headache pill]

‘Project Management involves thinking before acting, making good choices based on good knowledge, keeping everyone informed who needs to be informed and balancing the need to do a job well with the limits of our purse.’

[Nicely put]

‘If they got here, shouldn't we be asking them the question? No offence to the team from NASA, but we must learn from the market leaders.’

[Warned you about this type of response but I like the market leader concept]

Getting something new and exciting done with a group of people!

[Sweet and looking at it from a different angle]

The true definition of a project, according to modern acceptance, is a vast undertaking, too big to be managed, and therefore likely enough to come to nothing.

[A little negative perhaps but I hear the pain]

‘As we travel through the space and time continuum, project management is the universal tool that enables our journeys to take the shortest route through space, over the shortest duration of time while using the smallest number of qualified carbon units possible.’

[I like the agile style here and there were a lot of ‘journey’ based explanations suggested]

‘It's worth pointing out to the aliens that project management also requires the ability to perform miracles, and that project managers are actually miracle workers. Like Jesus who fed multitudes with two fish and five loaves, we also have to miraculously deliver unrealistic expectations in unrealistic timescales with a limited budget. That takes a very special skill, which makes project managers very special beings.’

[I go along with the proposal that we are special beings but not quite sure of the supernatural skills – I am hearing more pain]

‘A recursive scientific art aimed at achieving the goals that were set at the beginning and which needs to be achieved within the boundary of inherent applied or existing constraints. Of course this would have to be followed with the legitimate explanation...’

[Over my head for sure]

‘Project Management is a Verb, not a Noun.’

[A good thought, slightly off topic but I do like it]

And so they went on (thank you to everybody again) – a mixture of desperation, humour, and deep thinking.

The Lazy Project Manager

Productive Laziness



So why is it so hard?

Here we are with an alien (or friend or relative or neighbour) and we have 5 minutes to tell them what we do. Surely it should be simple?

Albert Einstein said 'If you can't explain something simply; you don't understand it well enough'

Really? I think that we know project management pretty well and we certainly have plenty of documentation on the subject to help us out and we have been doing it for quite some time now.

Leonardo da Vinci declared 'Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.'

So we are all unsophisticated now as well? Definitely not. It feels like I have started a journey but have not reached any destination with this one. If you wish the LinkedIn discussions are still out there so maybe add your thoughts and see more of what other PMs have volunteered.

In a final desperate attempt to get something useful to conclude this article I texted the online answer service 36663 who declare themselves 'the UK's most accurate text question and answer service, knows pretty much everything'. After 5 minutes I got this reply:

'Project management is the planning, execution and finalization of projects. It involves identifying resource requirements and controlling quality.'

I mentioned this to the alien that lives in my teenage son's room, mostly playing on the X-box, and he just said 'What?'

Life!#

About the Author

Despite his title of 'The Lazy Project Manager', Peter Taylor is in fact a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in project management, program management and the professional development of project managers: Currently as Director of a PMO at Siemens PLM Software, a global supplier of product lifecycle management solutions.

He is an accomplished communicator and leader; always adopting a proactive and business-focused approach, and he is a professional speaker with City Speakers International.



See and meet Peter Taylor at the IPMA World Congress in Istanbul, November 1-4, 2010.

He is also the author of '*The Lazy Project Manager*' book (Infinite Ideas 2009) – for more information - www.thelazyprojectmanager.com. You can subscribe to a series of free podcasts on iTunes (The Lazy Project Manager).