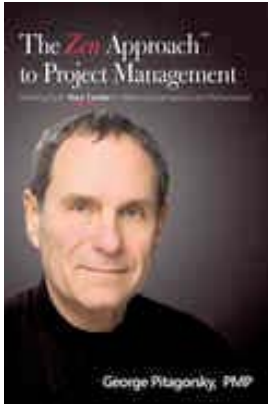


## PM World Today Book Review



**Book Title:** *The Zen Approach™ to Project Management: Working from Your Center to Balance Expectations and Performance*

**Author:** George Pitagorsky, PMP®

**Publisher:** International Institute for Learning (IIL) USA

**List Price:** US\$29.95

**Publication Date:** 2007

**ISBN:** 9780970827692

**Reviewer:** Kathryn H. Phillips – MBA, PMP®

**Review Date:** September 2007

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### Introduction to the Book

I desired to review **The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** as “The Zen practitioner sees the universe as a complex of systems and processes”<sup>1</sup> as do I. Not only do I believe the universe is complex; but, within the complexity is order. I personally believe that given the divinity of the creation of the universe comes guidance if abided by prescribes its orderly and effective unfolding as well as identifies the characteristics of a dynamic self.

I believe alignment with this same Power can also bring about comparable, orderly effortless conditions for self and our own project undertakings. The Author recognizes existence of this Power and/or Zen within each of us which explains why the Author painstakingly asks the reader throughout the book “Are you awake, yet?”

**The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** is a how-to book in<sup>2</sup>:

- Minimizing unnecessary stress
- Applying mindfulness and open-mindedness
- Managing expectations
- Manager performance
- Break(ing) free of self-imposed barriers
- Remaining calm and energetic

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<sup>1</sup> The Zen Approach™ to Project Management, p.160

<sup>2</sup> The Zen Approach™ to Project Management, p.14

Project managers and business leaders find themselves continually striving to bring projects in on time, scope and budget by hastening efforts to push the project ahead in a straight line from project initiation to project close as quickly as possible while clearing hurdles with use of the standard PMBOK tools and techniques. But, try as they may...effective use of these tools and techniques do not always alleviate the heightened complexities and accompanying conflicts which often result in projects that cannot meet set expectations.

As a result, many project manager professionals seek other industry prescribed alternatives such as negotiation and conflict resolution techniques to alleviate project conflicts and restore team harmony. Such techniques do yield marginal returns but, project managers still question their own leadership skills while attempting to identify the root cause of negative team dynamics.

### **Overview of Book's Structure**

**The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** structure unveils itself throughout as an approach at both self enrichment and self control to get the best from your projects. The Author requires the reader to step back, throw off the shackles of typical project management and life philosophies and begin to embrace the Zen concept of project management.

The reader is encouraged to find his or her "center" and align with the natural concepts of the universe. The reader is continually challenged by the Author to conduct a self-test to determine if the reader is "awake"? Has the reader taken off the strapping of the old man and put on the new?

The reader should then experience an epiphany i.e., recognizing the state of wisdom needed to reach the goals of this book outlined in the above Introduction. Once the Author's challenge effects the desired state of mind in the reader, that of being centered, balanced and perfecting one's form; the book next unveils itself in such a way the Author subtly introduces the wisdom and perspective of The Zen Approach™ in attaining project goals, scheduling, risk management, quality results/performance/people through continual and constant self inquiry. Brief case studies and instances of real world project management conflicts are reported with recommended resolution with use of Zen.

The book's last chapter concludes with Managing from your Center – a self assessment and test of actualization in order to learn more about the reader's emotional, interpersonal skills and negative thinking aka "fears" which sabotage many "well laid project plans".

## Highlights: What I liked!

- Recognition that effective project management process flow is not always linear. Many will recall the mathematical rule that the shortest (and most efficient) distance between two points is a straight line. It is refreshing to now know that a non-linear approach is not only productive but, downright essential to take the needed detours in maintaining project health, team integrity, wholeness and on-time performance. One can safely conclude that personal interactions and relationships do not grow linearly but with great mathematical dispersion and variation.
- Constant self tests to see if one is “awake” as the reader navigates throughout the book to heighten or rouse the reading experience. This is a critical on-going self appraisal as one must check to see if the body-mind complex is engaged to seek and apply the wisdom that comes with the “awakening” that takes place given the Zen approach.
- Recognition by the Author of the complex nature of the book. The Author reveals that the reader should expect to be confused early-on. The reader is asked at the beginning of the book “are you confused yet?” This book is not an easy read. The reader must find and operate from one’s center as he or she may unconsciously resist the Zen concepts that might appear contrary to one’s own belief system. Adaptation is required to experience some form of transformation as the reader attempts to access the Power within.
- Sound reasoning that successful project management requires the Project Manager first forge a strong relationship (identification) with self and next the project team. Most project managers direct the majority of their human resource and interpersonal relationship energies toward the project team with little left for self retrospection.
- Interspersed throughout each chapter are powerful “quotes, quips, and definitions” framed in gray dialogue boxes. These sounds bites have huge value-add as these remarks at a glance reinforce and institutionalize each chapter’s message for future reference, memorization and serve as a synopsis.
- Introduction of **The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** concept of “letting go” and letting things happen. “After all, projects are about making them happen and not letting them happen.”<sup>3</sup> A new effective form of calculated risk management.

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<sup>3</sup> The *Zen Approach*™ to Project Management, p.14

- Alignment of discussion points with the PMI methodologies and Project Management Body of Knowledge (**PMBOK®**) processes and areas of knowledge throughout.

### Shortfalls: What was missing!

A transformation<sup>4</sup> exercise technique early-on in the book of finding one's center is needed and would help prepare the reader for the huge stretch growth required to fully embrace, dare to practice and maximize benefits from the concepts within the book. This first step would have shortened the learning curve a bit and hastened a learning environment where the reader quickly becomes the material and more easily carries out the Zen philosophy.

A warning alerting the reader that the desired transformation the Author seeks will be more than a paradigm shift. The transformation experience is almost tantamount to first creating and then resolving one's own "identity crises" followed by multiple readings of this book and perpetual self appraisals throughout. Also, **The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** is not a book to attempt to read straight through without pauses interjected through-out in order to allow the reader to better comprehend these new practices and reflect on the Author's written words surrounding Zen.

There are a few would like to "have had" in this book such as:

- ✓ Benchmarks so the reader can gauge if he or she is arriving at their center. "Am I there yet?"
- ✓ Statistical studies and comparison tables quantifying actual reduction of project complexities and anxieties that are eliminated when a project manager relinquishes the power struggle and attempts to control i.e. "letting go" and "letting things happen".
- ✓ Specific examples of Pitagorsky's project challenges since most "how to books" use the author's first hand experiences in substantiating the author's recommended "truths". Would like to have seen this book written more in the first person.
- ✓ More history on the origins of Zen in the beginning of the book rather than housing this critical information as one of the last appendices in the book. The main attraction to the book is having Zen in the book's title which creates an expectation to first learn more about Zen followed by its application within project management.

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<sup>4</sup> Transcendental

## Who might benefit from the Book

Pitagorsky advises this book was written for people interested in managing projects and finding a way to reach their highest potential by leaving one's false created self behind. This premise makes **The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** a great companion book to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (**PMBOK®**) as a new tool and technique to further advance project management efforts and accomplishments.

This book is also good for anyone who is interested in attaining greater spiritual enlightenment by applying truths prescribed by the Spiritual Masters referenced in this book would also easily benefit.

## Conclusion

**The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** is a very deep, introspective and thought provoking book. This book is for those who are serious about seeking wisdom from the spiritual and philosophical "Masters" and desire to experience a heightened awareness to go beyond their intellect to experience life changing events and the ability to manage projects in an unfiltered way. Others may see this book as simply being more about transformation of the human will and spirit with people and projects being the downstream benefactors.

Those who recognize the power that lies within the pages of **The Zen Approach™ to Project Management** will recognize how huge the undertaking of digesting and applying these truths will be. The reader should expect that successful use and application of the techniques in Pitagorsky's book are life long endeavors. The techniques in this book will stand the test of time and should be as effective tomorrow and it is today. This book is a must have in anyone's library who desires to have an unfettered relationship with self and others.



**Kathryn Phillips**  
*Contributing Book Reviewer*



**Kathryn Phillips** services the *new* AT&T as Area Manager of Project Management. Kathryn is PMI PMP® certified. She received the Bachelors of Science degree in Business Administration – Economics from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville Illinois. She earned the Graduate Certificate in Project Management in 2002 followed by the Masters in Business Administration in 2005 from the University of Texas at Dallas – Richardson Texas. Kathryn can be reached at [kp0090@att.com](mailto:kp0090@att.com).

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