

PM World Today Book Review



Book Title: *Rainbows and Ratholes, Best Practices for Managing Successful Projects*

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Introduction to the Book

This is a specialty book of approximately 150 pages and is a compilation of essays, white papers, training lectures, observations and personal experiences developed by the author for presentation to learned societies, corporations and PMI sponsored seminars and events. The book is organized in a series of essays focusing on the “what and how” of successful Project Management with each essay dealing with specific aspects of situations that may be encountered by both new and experienced managers. The essays serve as “windows” by presenting an integrated panoramic view of challenges and best practices that may be of benefit to the Project Manager at some point during a difficult project.

The author speaks of successful organizations embracing a “projectized” culture that is founded on the principle of customer focus, committed sponsorship, trusting relationships, outstanding teamwork and continuous improvement. The author asserts that this “projectized” culture will permeate through the organization and will empower project teams to operate most effectively and will deliver successful results. His emphasis and purpose of writing and compiling this book is to help Project Managers “avoid the pitfalls or *ratholes* and catch the pot of gold of success at the end of the rainbow!”

Overview of Book

Following the introduction of the book the author lists seventeen essays beginning with the *world of project management* and closes with *finishing the job with the right tools!* This selection of essays enhances the knowledge base established by the PMBOK with the intent of adding supporting information based on hard-earned experience and concepts of guidance that

managers can add to their Project Manager's tool kit. The book closes the final section with four appendices that describes a Project Maturity Model – *checklist*, a list of Diagrams used throughout the book to visually describe specific concepts, a Bibliography with Chapter References and the book finishes out with a list of Recommended Readings.

The author sets the tone in the first chapter by making the statement “*The Universe is hostile to the success of your projects*”, and then he follows with the pointed question, “*What are you doing about it?*” By this approach he immediately places the reader in the defensive mode and asks a follow-on question, “*What does a Project Manager Do?*” The author then drops back and applies a softer approach as he reviews the nature of projects and proceeds to define what a project is or should be. After asking several more direct questions he then asks “*Is your project headed for a rathole?*” He asks the reader to consider who's reputation is on the line in specific matter-of- fact terms, “**Whose butt is on the line for this project?**” He proceeds to conclude the chapter with a summary of Project Manager responsibilities and introduces two unique symbols, the first is a triangular symbol for *Lessons Learned – Avoiding the Rathole – Warning Signs*, and the second symbol is a circle with the sun shining indicating the end of the rainbow where the reader can find the “**pot of gold**”. This section is labeled *Catch the Pot of Gold – Best Practices*. The author usually lists five points of important characteristics under each symbol so that the reader can see the direction the author is heading and add the key points to the *Project Manager's Toolbox*.

The second chapter is titled *responsibility without authority* and in this chapter the author discusses the Project Managers *role* and the specific language used to focus the project and to emphasize on how to communicate with the stakeholders and clients. Again, the chapter closes with a summary of the highpoints and is followed by the *Lessons Learned - Avoiding the Rathole – Warning Signs* and the *Catch the Pot of Gold - Best Practices*. The author uses diagrams and charts in each chapter to help the reader visualize the concepts he presents and to enable the reader to visually comprehend his direction and meaningful purpose.

Throughout the book, the author likes to alert the reader with pointed questions that are designed to make the reader think and consider the alternatives. Each successive chapter offers a challenge to the reader along with a series of steps or actions that need to be taken to avoid the traps (*ratholes*). The author's intent is to raise the level of awareness so the Project Manager can take action to ensure the project stays on target and arrives successfully at the end of each phase with the desired deliverable. If the Project Manager is successful (and he should be) then he will find or rather, *catch the pot of gold!*

The author refers frequently to the PMBOK and each chapter is enriched by its guidelines and words of wisdom. By identifying principle concepts and effective tools to empower the Project Manager, the author helps the reader stay focused. He instructs the reader to get organized and construct a *baseline schedule*. He encourages the reader to develop all the necessary steps by first establishing the business need, developing a statement of work, submitting a request for proposal, creating a work breakdown structure all the way through the 10 steps (or more if required) until the reader arrives at the *finish*. To further enhance his action steps, he provides

short real-life scenarios where he places the reader in the position of Project Manager. One scenario example starts out with the boss congratulating the individual as the newly selected Project Manager. The author quickly guides the new Project Manager with six key steps for obtaining and maintaining the proper mindset for managing a project and in the sixth step he highlights the methodology of the SMART model (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Target-driven). In later chapters he reviews concepts such as project performance indicators, costs, quality measurements, dealing with uncertainty and risk, and communication issues that Project Managers must face. He also discusses a manager's need to use *soft skills*. He points out that despite an abundance of leadership training the development of soft skills continues to be a major area of concern for Project Managers. He further states, "*Project Managers are aware of these skills, but many fail to apply and practice them as an integral part of their management discipline and style.*"

The final two essays focus on *doing the right thing for your project* and *finish the job with the right tools!* On doing the right thing for your project the author discusses the fact that "**your reputation is only as good as your last project**". He notes that the Project Manager has certain obligations and loyalties to many constituencies throughout the life of a project. His concern for the Project Manager is that the manager's reputation is built around personal integrity and professionalism; therefore, the author provides a set of guidelines and developmental exercises to enhance the Project Manager's skills. He goes on to discuss the impact of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) on Project Managers and he reviews the four key elements that cover the *Audit Requirements, Personal Power, Audit Power, and Stricter Penalties*. He then elaborates on the Seven Pillars of Transparency as they apply to Project Management and he finishes his discussion with ISO 9001 and SOX requirements acknowledging that *customer focus* and *continuous improvement* must not be diminished because of the explicit regulations centering on compliance.

The author's final essay drives the point home that a *rathole* is not where a Project Manager wants to be. He gives two extremes that at first seem humorous unless you have actually been in a similar situation - **Fouled Up Beyond Belief (FUBB)** and **Fouled Up Beyond Repair (FUBR)**. Either one of these can cause a Project Manager's heart, spirit and energy to plummet to the depths of despair. The author describes this as a "*danger zone*" and provides **Ten Tools of the Trade** for skillfully managing around such traps in hopes that the Project Manager can avert the impending disaster and will make a habit of continually scanning the horizon for indicators that may be the beginnings of a serious problem. Therefore, applying the tools of the trade to re-direct or turn-things-around is imperative so that success can be fully achieved. The author closes the chapter in the traditional manner of Learned Lessons and Best Practices and he concludes with this final thought. "*Successful Project Management is built on a solid foundation of customer focus, executive sponsorship, organizational relationships, motivated teams and process orientation.*" He then challenges the reader to –

"Build your foundation and catch the pot of gold!"

Highlights: What I liked!

The book is filled with pearls of wisdom from a talented author who has lead, developed and salvaged many projects. His focus is to target specific areas of a project where a Project Manager can get into trouble where the project has taken control and is now **managing** the Project Manager. The author provides tools and recommends specific applications of managerial skills to be applied to keep the project on course, within scope, on time, on budget and delivering a quality product. His approach can be applied to traditional projects such as construction as well as to IT projects. Essentially, any organization can benefit from his approach where there is a need to provide quality deliverables for a product or service. Time and again the author is adamant about frequent and timely communication between the Project Manager and the client and key stakeholders. I like that the author supports his concepts and approaches with references from the PMBOK and interprets how these principles can be applied in real world situations.

I particularly liked Chapter 8 titled ***if it's not documented, it doesn't exist***. The author describes project phases and how they relate to doing business and delivering projects from beginning to end. All-the-while providing a smooth transition from one phase to the next. Having recently completed a project of my own based on the results of a feasibility study, it was interesting that the project's approach paralleled the author's suggestion of phase development using Feasibility, Design and Prototype, Build, Test and Rollout.

The author displays in Figure 8 titled *Project Implementation Plan - An Operational View*, where he describes a **Project Workbook** and he suggests an outline for both Planning Documents and Operational Documents that should be included in the process as a fundamental tool of the Project Manager. The author further describes the various documents needed for different types of projects along with a suggestion for the use of Project Manager Software to keep the project organized, focused, within scope and for documented support whenever the client or stakeholder requests a change or challenges the work being performed. The author stressed that a Project Manager can be fooled (*fall into a rathole*) by relying too heavily on management tools and by allowing the project to go forward on autopilot. He warns that the Project Manager must always be involved and should keep in mind that the tools are there to **assist - not to be a substitute**. Regardless of the methodology, I like that the Project Manager should maintain a Project Workbook that is easily accessible for reference by the members of the project team and *should never be a secret document*.

Shortfalls: What was Missing!

The book has few shortfalls that need to be identified. The length and size of the book is very compatible for travel and the *diagrams and, tables are clear enough even though they are slightly* compressed. The book does not have a separation between the last page of Chapter 17 and the first page of the four appendices. This makes the reader feel that Chapter 17 has more information even though the Lessons *Learned and Best Practices* sections were just completed. The need for an Appendices Title Page is desirable to give proper separation.

The first of the four appendices is the *Project Management Maturity – Checklist*. Here the author provides his “Ten Golden Rules” with a series of questions under each rule. Upon viewing the checklist, somehow it didn’t look like checklists I have seen in other publications. It was printed in a narrative style rather than in an *indented-block style* thus leaving the reader slightly uneasy about the format. So, I went to the author’s website and I did an internet search to see if there actually was more to the checklist and if it was printed in a different format than what was depicted in the book. As luck would have it, I found the checklist in a more traditional format that the author used in one of his recent presentations. Under each of the Ten Golden Rules was a *check box* with the question following providing a visual queue for the reader to take note that this is a checklist action item. This format should be incorporated into the book’s next revision for consistency with the author’s latest presentations.

Who might benefit from the Book

The author has designed the book to appeal to professionals at all levels and who work at various levels within the organization including those in executive management, engineers, project managers, system analysts, client representatives, project team leaders and members as well as instructors and students of Project Management. The book would also apply to entrepreneurs who are establishing a small business and need encouragement as they muddle through various stages of business growth and development. The concepts and templates presented could readily support writings of strategic planners such as Porter, Deming, Crosby and Juran. The book emphasizes that a successful manager will be on time, on budget and successfully delivering results that will be pleasing and satisfactory to the client and stakeholders. This little book provide a spark of insight and energy to nudge a Project Manager over an obstacle or constraint that is hindering the project flow and the variety of topics covered makes the book timely and invaluable.

Conclusion

The author has taken his experience and knowledge and organized his writings into logical chapters of this modest book. His frustration with projects that were not going well or as planned is captured in these essays of wisdom. Each chapter identifies what to *avoid* and what are the *best practices* are excellent pearls of wisdom he labels the “pot of gold” meaning this practice can make you rich along with all the good things that come with success instead of getting caught in a *rathole* of frustration and dismay. This book is packed with many of the author’s insights and personal experiences that enlighten and encourage the reader to take the time to sufficiently plan a project no matter what the size or how many people are involved. The also book emphasizes the need for the Project Manager to make an extra effort in the area of communication to keep the client and stakeholders informed throughout the life of the project. This will keep the project on the high road of success and minimize the obstacles encountered along the way.

I would highly recommend this book for anyone who is interested in improving their understanding of how to organize a project and to enhance their communication skills with clients, stakeholders and employees. The use of visual diagrams, flow charts, and logical steps help to drive home the concepts that lead to success. If this strategy is embraced, *consistency and continuous improvement* will be the hallmark for those Project Managers who apply the *Best Practices* and adhere to the *Warnings Signs* whenever the loathsome **Rathole** is near.

About the Reviewer:



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Earl W. Crisp, D. P. A., - is employed by the U. S. Department of Education, Post Secondary Education for Eligibility and Oversight of Guarantors, Lenders and Servicers. He is also an adjunct instructor for the Management Department at the University of Texas at Arlington and for the College of Business at Dallas Baptist University. He is a former Navy C-130 pilot and he enjoyed collateral assignments in Administration, Training, Quality Assurance, and Human Resources. His Doctorate in Public Administration is from the University of La Verne and his M. S. in Management is from Troy University. He is a certified mediator, private pilot and radio announcer. He completed his Project Management Professional training in the Executive Management Program at the University of Texas at Dallas and is a member of PMI.