

“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore”
An unbalanced equation: Separating Facts from Fiction and Feelings

By Rob Zanfardino

For those of you who do not recall the American story classic The Wizard of Oz, written by L. Frank Baum in its most simplistic description it is a story about a teenage girl named Dorothy growing up in the heartlands of the United States, who receives a blow to the head and has a dream of this magical place where she is confronted with untold obstacles and challenges. With the help of friends she meets, each with their own strengths and short comings they work as a team, and overcome obstacles placed before them. In the end they help Dorothy reach her ultimate goal which is to find the great and powerful Wizard of Oz who will grant her wish to return home.

More and more I started thinking about this story, I realized that this story could very easily be applied to project management and its disciplines than one would first realize. In fact I see so many similarities I would like to pursue this concept in this article. We talk about project management as if it applies only to the IT/IS world and we must remember that we are just a small part of this equation. In fact we need to spread our disciplines over to the business side and have them become as proficient as an IT/IS project team in the management of projects. For those of you who are first time project managers your first few projects will make you feel very much like Dorothy waking up in a strange land. At certain bends along the way you will run into your own types of munchkins and witches and you will have to become very nimble on your feet.

First, I want to digress for a moment and conduct two experiments with you. The first experiment, go to the kitchen and get the following items: two tablespoons, tape, and two eggs. Now for the first experiment, I want you to place one of the eggs on one end of the spoon putting the spoon across your index finger try to balance the egg without holding on to the spoon, much like you would imagine if you were on either end of a see-saw. If you have done exactly what I said you should have one of three results: The egg could not be picked up; it went crashing to the floor and you have egg all over your self (sorry I could not let the one go by!) which by my best guess will happen 99.99% of the time; or you truly are an exceptional human being and are able to balance an egg at the end of the spoon without holding on to it. By all accounts this will make you an exceptional project manager being able to balance all that will be thrown at you and you should be writing this article instead of reading it. For the second experiment, tape the two spoons together having both ends of the spoon facing up and facing in opposite directions and repeat the balancing experiment placing two eggs on both spoons and place the spoons on the middle of your index finger, chances

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are you will have a higher percentage rate of balancing them and not dropping the eggs onto the floor.

Balancing seems to be one of the biggest challenges that we face in the project management world of ours trying to complete projects when the equation is not balanced. As you are all aware IT/IS projects have a high failure rate, not because of methodologies being used or the individuals working on the projects are not skilled, one of the problems comes from a basic lack of understanding from the business stakeholders as to what it really takes to complete our tasks. How many times have we all sat around the table at meetings discussing project issues when it is clear the business side or business stakeholders were really looking to the IT/IS side to have all the answers to the questions and issues that arise, including those that are not IT/IS related. We are reaching a critical junction in this process, the business side must start to think more like the IT/IS side when it pertains to IT/IS projects. It amazes me that for years the IT/IS side of the equations have been forced to account for almost every little detail and penny without the business side sharing the same pain.

For example, as a project manager when sizing a project I am expected to estimate with a fair degree of exactness how many hours will be utilized from the various IT/IS team members, rolling those numbers up, putting a weighted hourly amount to each of the skills and give an estimate to the project cost. It never ceases to amaze me, when I forecast the project costs and man hours for the business side, how the business side does not understand that their time affects the deliverables and cost of the project just as much as the IT/IS side.

Another issue that comes up time and time again in this project equation is the ability for the business side to think that our time is not as valuable as their time. If we are really going to capture the true costs of projects we should be capturing the business side costs just as much as we are doing for the IT/IS side. This will substantially reduce two of the biggest project impacts: Scope Creep and Cost Overruns. Once the business side becomes accountable for their impact on the project, the project costs will be reduced. The business side must be charged for every hour they delay the project, (i.e. they want to sneak in additional requirements through the back door, or they want to haggle with the project team that the color blue on a given screen is not blue enough) before the games stop. So in order for the project equation to be balanced and to get a very real dollars and cents of the true cost of the projects I believe there has to be a fundamental change in the way we account for project expenses. First the business side needs to budget and track their hours just like the IT/IS side does. Second, if not already done, each department must be charged (Charge Back) for all or part of the project costs from an expense bucket that has been allocated for the new year. (For more on this concept refer to my article, [The Genie in the Bottle](#) published in the PMFORUM). This change will only take place when the Chief

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Information Officer and the Chief Financial Officer come to an agreement (“Politics”) that the equation will finally be balanced.

I recall a situation where I observed a contract project manager who was assigned to develop a server solution for the internal department with the assistance of a systems architect, to size this project for the customer. The project manager asked for an account code to charge the project’s expenses against, since the department delayed in giving the account code to the project manager from the start and due to the limited time the contracted project manager had of this systems architect, a decision was made by his manager to go ahead with the sizing. As you can imagine the internal department believed they had the edge over this contract manager because he was an outsider and they would take him for a ride and request changes to the requirements every other day. Each change would result in the project manager and the architect redoing the project specifications. This went on for several gyrations and of course the clock was ticking. The project manager in doing his job, reporting the weekly project costs via his weekly status reports requested the account code from this department again and again. At some point it became evident to the project manager this department did not have the money budgeted for this project and was playing the game of running up enough costs to eventually go in front of some director to say, “Hey we have come this far why not just go ahead and worry about the dollars later.” The contracted project manager understood that one of his fiduciary responsibilities was to control costs, he shut the project down due to a lack of funds and charged the department \$10,000.00 for sizing costs. Needless to say it got ugly because the department did not want to pay. But due to proper documentation and the support from the internal architect who validated their time spent, the project manager was able to provide enough proof that the department must pay for the project costs whether they proceeded or not. In the end, the project was terminated due to a lack of funds and the department incurred the project costs.

Another point I would like to discuss is that we are not doing enough benchmarking in the IT/IS world. For those of you who are not familiar with the term benchmarking, it is defined as taking an internal process you have and comparing the same or like process with another company, in or out of your same field to see if you are the “Best of Breed“ or if you need to improve upon it. In a recent article in the January 29th 2006 edition of the New York Times, they focused on Intel and how they were able to benchmark with a company that trains sports car racing pit crews. Pit crews for those of you who do not follow racing are the guys/gals who must service the race car and get them back on the track in less than thirty seconds. During one of Intel’s brainstorming session they realized their internal manufacturing processes were very similar to that of a pit crew. They proceeded to learn how to identify common goals and to work together in a short time span. What I found very interesting was a comment from

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the pit crew trainer who said not only do you have to pay attention to your part of the process you have to keep your eye on the other guy so that both of you succeed. For example, as you are changing the tires you have to keep your eye on the other tire changer, and the person who fuels the car to ensure that when the go signal is given the wheels will not fall off or the car will not pull off dragging the gas can. That comment sounds as if it came from an IT/IS project manager and in fact each member of the project team should be doing more of this. With the exception of the project manager who should be looking at all the key players all the time, there is a fundamental flaw in how the project team shares in the oversight of the entire project. Not only the project manager but the entire team needs to lift their heads up out of the sand or stand up in their cubicles and ensure they are aware of the entire process. Developers cannot be in a locked room and just code, they need to be aware of how their coding or their bugs in the coding will effect the timeline and they also have to become more involved in the day to day business to fully understand the business. Nor can a business stakeholder just walk in the room, cough up a set of incomplete requirements, or "not being sure what I really want" set of requirements, without realizing how they affect the costs as it pertains to the developer's time. They also need to stop the "back door" or "add on" requests which impacts timelines

At this point we should really acknowledge how important benchmarking is to the IT/IS field and how important the PMFORUM and other similar project management websites have become to us. We all have an opportunity to share our successes and failures and by that very nature alone we are benchmarking. To this point I want to extend to my fellow project managers to encourage them to share their views in this field. Having a forum such as this and the support from Hugh Woodard we are on the verge of truly making this site a world leader of information exchange. As long as we have a place where ideas and opinions can be exchanged without being altered to fit political or corporate agendas will we be able to grow and strengthen our profession. I challenge one and all who truly love what we are doing to mentor the newbies (New Project Managers) and provide them with our experiences. As I mentioned in the past I learned more when I was exposed to talented people than any book that I could have read on the subject. Due to the nature of our work we truly work with the best and the brightest on both sides of the equation. Benchmarking really comes down to comparisons and it can be as complicated or as simple as you want to make it. It can come from any place but largely it is built on experiences.

To prove this point can anyone tell me what a nurse and a police officer have in common? While I was working for Gentiva Health Services my business stakeholders were originally from the nursing field and while I was with CompuCom I had a chance to work with police officers doing hardware systems migration work. What I learned from both experiences and one that I would be hard pressed to figure before hand, is both groups of stakeholders take

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exceptional detailed notes. They were so good it forced me to become a better note taker to ensure that something I or others on my team may have said did not come back to haunt us. The point once again, benchmarking is all about comparing similar experiences/processes and picking out the best in each.

Getting back to the beginning of the article I would like to study the Wizard of Oz a bit closer and to my original premise that Dorothy can be described as a project manager, let's try to reenact the story. After Dorothy's house had fallen on the Wicked Witch of the East she is pursued by the Wicked Witch of the West (the witch's sister) and the only way out of her dilemma is to follow the yellow brick road. So the first thing Dorothy was able to establish were the project goals which simply put was to get home. Not having all the skills she needed to complete her project base she utilized the skills and talent of the Scarecrow who was the thinker or strategist, the Tin Man who had the heart, and the Lion who had bravery. These three new members of her "cross border" team had their own goals to reaffirm their skills from the Wizard of Oz. They all traveled to the Emerald City to see the Wizard who would grant each of them their wishes.

One of Dorothy's first obstacles to overcome was to create an effective and cohesive team of individuals with many different backgrounds. Let's face it your project team cannot get more diverse than having a floppy scarecrow, a rusted out tin man and a cowardly lion watching your back. But if you really look at the story Dorothy accomplishes what is a primary goal for all project managers, she created a cohesive team built on integrity and relationships. There are very few people who can undermine you if you have integrity. Integrity must be the project manager's cornerstone. You must establish the standards of how the project morals will be set. If you allow meetings to start late, if you do not ensure that project hours are accurately accounted for, if you let the business side delay the requirement phase, if you let the account team play games or bully you into doing something that is not right you are going to be in for tough times. You must create the environment that you will not waver in the standards that you have set for yourself and the project

The other obstacle Dorothy was able to overcome was how she created an environment that let the team function using their skills. Too many times in the project manager's zeal to have a successful project we tend to over control and choke the team's creativity. I consulted for a waste management company several years ago trying to solve one of the owner's concerns that he did not have thinkers on his team, just workers and he felt he needed to go out and hire more managers. One day he left the office and a problem came up where a decision had to be made while he was gone. I clearly observed that no one in the office was willing to make a decision because they all feared what type of retribution might take place from the owner. Everything stopped, nothing moved forward until the manager returned to make the decision. When I later recounted

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my observations the owner admitted it was very hard for him to let go and he felt that he needed to be involved in every decision. Over time and at times with much pain, we devised a plan that would force him to let go. The first step was to send the owner out to lunch for an hour each day, and later for him to disappear for a half day so the decision making process would be forced upon the employees. The other piece that had to be changed was for the owner to not be so critical if a bad decision was made in his absence and to become more of a mentor. You must evaluate the thinking process much like a math teacher who grades not only for right answers but the steps you took to achieve the results. Knowing the right steps will help you succeed over the long run even if at first you fail, the right process will always win out.

In the Wizard of Oz there were moments that showed how by acting as a team of four and not as one they were able to overcome their obstacles. When Dorothy was trapped inside of the Wicked Witch of the West's castle and time was running out for her and Toto, the Scarecrow, Tin man, and Lion were able to think among themselves and devise a plan to get into the castle and rescue her. If they were in an environment that would not allow them to think and be creative the rescue plan would have never been developed.

What I truly feel is the most pivotal part of the story is when they are able to get to see the Wizard, it turns out that he is really just another mortal man. The power to create and reach ones full potential is in all of us. The Scarecrow, Lion and Tin man did not have to go elsewhere or seek help from someone else they had all those qualities within them the entire time. All it took was someone like Dorothy who had a vision, had the ability to organize and focus, and the integrity to do good things that lead to a successful project.

At the end of the day as we all follow that yellow brick road down the project path, you could very well be faced with things dropping on your head, combating evil people who want to torpedo your project, and be faced with flying monkeys who want to take it away from you. Like Dorothy you have to have your own set of ruby red slippers in your portfolio of skills so that you will be able to know when to click your slippers three times to get back home to achieve the balanced equation.

I want to conclude this article and thank those of you who have taken time to read my articles and pass this website to others in their organization. I especially want to thank Stacy Goff, PMP and Vice President of ASAPM who over the months directed his readers to my articles. In addition, I want to thank those folks who sent me emails regarding my past articles. I am honored to have a forum like this to express my viewpoints/thoughts and even more honored that you have taken time out of your day to tell me that things that I have been saying have been shared by you or you have learned from my past experiences and

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viewpoints. Just like benchmarking a free exchange of ideas and opinions will serve us all.

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