

PM World Today Featured Paper – October 2006
"Don't Buy Any Green Bananas!"
By Rob Zanfardino

I know what you are thinking. This is one of those tricks used by writers to catch your attention, as described to you in my last article: The Price is Right. To be completely honest, when I first heard the phrase, "Don't buy any green bananas", I did not like the sound of it. However the news turned to the positive and I had a chance to reflect upon my life. This quote served two purposes: The first being to remember to pay my term life insurance premium because I would still need it, and second, it would solve an immediate problem of what to write about in my next article.

This quote was told to me by a medical technician while I was having a medical procedure performed. As you may know most technicians cannot release the results of tests until the doctors have had a chance to review them. Being the examinee on the table, wearing funny robes and exposing my best assets, I wondered if this may be the final curtain call. I thought I would at least show the technician I was somewhat interested in the events taking place, so I tried to extract some information out of her regarding the test results.

Her response was firm and direct; she could not release information but said she would tell me if the test results indicated that my life was not long for this earth. Wondering how tactful this person would be with the bad news, I asked her how she would present such devastating news. She responded in a curt fashion, we would say, "It may be wise for you not to go out and buy any green bananas". When a puzzling look came over my face she quickly added, "Because you will not have enough time left in your life to see them ripen." With that she laughed in a macabre fashion and walked out of the room.

Lying on the exam table hoping not to see any angelic light descending down upon me from the heavens, I thought it would be a good time to take the opportunity to parlay this phrase into a new article and try to do some good with this life lesson. Thinking about my own mortality, I realized that as project managers we may need to think about how to manage the end of projects that for various reasons should not continue. Even as a consultant, you need to know when to shut a completed project down when it has been successfully completed or more importantly when you need to "Bail Out" when things are "Tanking" ("Bail Out" refers to pilots who had to jump from their burning planes in WWII and "Tanking" refers to something that is sinking and not holding any water).

"Don't Buy Any Green Bananas" By Rob Zanfardino, 09/01/06, 845-226-6074 (zanfardino4@earthlink.net) The information contained in this article is considered privileged and is intended only for the user of the recipient named above. If you are not the intended recipient or a representative of the intended recipient, you have received this article in error and must not copy, use or disclose the contents of this article to anybody else unless you have written permission by the author. If you have received this article in error, please notify the sender immediately by return e-mail and permanently delete the copy you received.

This is not always an easy concept for a project manager to swallow. We are trained to run projects to their successful end. This is what we are paid to do, but more importantly you must have the back bone to know when to shut the project down. This is especially true when the project has turned for the worst and it may no longer be in the best interest of the business stakeholder or the company at large to continue. Remember, you have the fiduciary responsibility to ensure that company assets are being managed to their fullest and to ensure that the project costs truly reflect the actual expenses. In some instances you have to be able to say, and say it with conviction, that this is not the best way to spend the company's money and things cannot go on as is. It is not an easy thing to do, especially for the new project manager who is just trying to get through their first project alive, but it must be done. If you see business stakeholders dragging their feet on requirements or "futzing around" (wasting time) on the Beta Test Phase, you need to drop the hammer as quickly as possible. Time is money and as the project manager you are being measured against the time on the project and the costs that occur.

I recall a situation that happened to me some years ago as a new consultant soon after I had left IBM. Grabbing any work to get my business off the ground, I was able to contract with a small manufacturing company in upstate New York. It was a family owned and operated business whose behavior was influenced by their very strong European culture. It was my assignment to improve the purchasing department which was "Tanking" fast.

Well the first thing I found was that the two partners who were brothers did not speak to each other in a civil tone, which had gone on for years. The relationship between the two brothers was so bad that when a business decision had to be discussed an outside attorney had to be engaged to mediate the discussions. I found out later that even my own hiring had been without one of the brother's consent, but had been agreed to in a previous arbitration. As you may have guessed, I showed up one day and received a less than warm reception from the other brother.

Needless to say things got progressively worse. Since I did not get full buy-in from the other brother there was a constant feeling that eyes were always looking at the back of my head, although I cannot prove it. Regardless of my suggestions to improve the issues uncovered in the purchasing department, nothing would be agreed to by the other partner because each was always second guessing the other as to what their true motives were. One instance was related to inventory which was not selling and had been placed in the warehouse for storage years before. I suggested that it might be better to sell this inventory to a broker at cost than to let it sit there while hoping the market would turn around. No matter how convincing my arguments were to free up some much

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needed cash in order to buy merchandise that was selling, the thought of not making a profit on this current inventory would not fly. It got so bad that it was taking a physical and mental toll on the brother who had hired me.

This went on for weeks, and nothing was moving forward. My manager called me into his office for a discussion. You really have to picture what I am about to say and you have to believe me that this is the whole truth. Upon entering the office of the president, I noticed positioned right above his head a moose head mounted to the wall and pitched slightly off angle peering down at me. This moose when alive had to weigh in at 1500 pounds and looked like it would fall down on him at anytime. This thing had not been cleaned in years so it was very dusty. As I entered this darkened room the president was slumped in his high back chair and asked me to sit. When I took a seat he proceeded to tell me about his admiration for Hitler and how he admired people who had the will power to take their own life when the end was near. These ramblings went on for some time and in the end he asked me to read Adolph Hitler's autobiography, Mien Kempf and a book on assisted suicide. Needless to say I told the president that although this may be interesting reading to some, this was not appropriate reading material to hand out in a business environment. Nor was it appropriate to infer to someone that to be a team player you may be asked to go down with a sinking ship. Within a few days of that incident I left the company never to return. This is one example where it was perfectly acceptable to leave a project unfinished.

It will be your responsibility as a project manager to shut a project down when it is not in the best interest of the company to go on. I recall another situation when a major firm was installing a new accounts receivables package from an outside vendor. From the "get go" this project was doomed. First the internal accounts receivable department felt that they had lost the trust of their executive staff because they went to an outside firm. Second, the executive team failed to get buy-in from the accounts receivable group as to why this outside package may be the better way to go. Third, there was not enough business analysis performed before hand to ensure that all the requirements were identified so the transition would be smooth. Fourth, the directors of this company made promises to the executives (that ugly word called politics once again) that this package was going to be installed, on time and within budget. Finally and worst of all, a second line manager thought that "His" project would propel him to that corner office.

Well as you can imagine, one milestone after another was missed, the cost overruns started to mount and, like rats jumping from a sinking ship, key players found ways to get off the project to maintain their reputations in the company. As this went on, I had a chance to talk about the issues to a second line manager on

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the project. I asked him a very simple question: Is this package going to work? His response to me was, "No matter what, we will make it work". I asked him once again how can you say it will work with all the issues at hand. He replied and I will never forget the look on his face "**We Will Make it Work!**" Needless to say the project expenses kept piling up. More key members were jumping and the second line manager who hoped to have the corner office was forced to stay on the project and take the fall. Finally, so much money was spent, major milestones were missed and nothing was delivered that the executives shut the project down.

Because of politics and egos, millions of dollars were wasted, careers ruined and untold hardships occurred. This project never should have continued and it should have been stopped much earlier. The key project folks just never had the courage to end it. Unnecessary waste committed on projects all for the wrong reasons needs to end.

A third instance that I recall focused on a situation that can be very subliminal in nature but can have devastating effects on the project. It has to do with the dark part of human psychology that I still do not understand: internal sabotage. This is always the last thing any one would look at because people do not normally think that anyone would sink so low as to sabotage a project they are working on. But I think it happens far more than anyone realizes.

I was brought into a situation by a major company involving problems occurring on a LAN/WAN project. Although I was not leading the project, I was a stakeholder of sorts and was part of the daily meetings. Over the course of the project, issues naturally arose and always seemed to be solved by this one individual in the 11th hour. Call it gut instincts or perhaps my experiences working in business controls but the hairs were sticking up on the back of my neck. Far too often this one individual was able to solve the problem at midnight, publishing his results for all to read the next morning over coffee. I did some investigation, and developed a timeline of cause and effect scenarios. I then showed management how this individual was creating situations that would delay the project long enough so he could ride in for the rescue. I like to call it "Corporate" Munchausen's by Proxy Syndrome. This disease unfortunately affects some individuals who find the need to harm their children in order to receive public recognition for rushing in and saving them. This person suffered the corporate version of the disease, and once I had showed proof of my suspicions, the individual was transitioned off the project to a more obscure position where he could do little harm. I have only experienced this overt act of sabotage once or twice but I think we can all recall instances where things were not going right on a project for unexplained reasons.

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But how do you shut projects down, either when they are tanking or if you have completed all the requirements and the stakeholders want to drag it out forever? It is in this phase where we seem to get in trouble. As I have discussed in other articles, it all begins when you complete a thorough sizing phase and the results are reflected in your Statement of Work (SOW). This by far will be your most important project document. Without a well written/defined SOW, your project plan will be built on rotten timbers and will collapse under you. So many project managers spend hours reviewing their project plans when things tank. They fail to see that the original SOW may be the culprit. Just like an architect who creates well defined blueprints before building, your SOW should also reflect every footing, beam and electrical box that may be required.

As a Senior Project manager having to review SOW's, I am amazed at how incomplete they have become. More time needs to be spent preparing the SOW. If you are a consulting firm, and you are an account manager, you need to collaborate with your tech team and not keep them in the dark regarding the project. Likewise as the project manager you need to confirm that you have "Buy-In" from every member of the team, not just the business stakeholders.

In conclusion, if you want to stick around long enough to see the bananas ripen, you need to know when a project is worth starting, if the business stakeholders are stable enough to work with, and in what direction your project is heading. If you do not, the pain you will incur will result in your not living long enough on the project to see the fruits of your labor mature.



Mr. Rob Zanfardino



Robert J. Zanfardino, Senior Project / Program Manager, has worked with multi billion dollar corporations such as IBM, Gentiva Health Services, CompuCom, and Bristol-Myers Squibb, as well as smaller midsize companies while managing his own consulting company. This deep range of experiences over the years developed Rob into a Senior Advisor playing pivotal roles by identifying new strategies and methodologies within corporations as they effect the project life cycle. His ability to envision long term solutions combined with structuring sensible implementation plans have made Rob a valued asset and "Go To" resource. As an Adjunct Professor focusing on Business Process Management methodologies, Rob has devised quality strategies used to streamline processes that focus on the customer's needs. Rob is currently consulting with corporations enhancing their IT/IS projects, project management offices, and business process methodologies. Rob can be contacted at: 845-226-6074 or email: zanfardino4@earthlink.net.

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