

PM WORLD TODAY - PM TIPS & TECHNIQUES – FEBRUARY 2008

## What is Not a Project?

### *A primer for embracing project-based work*

*By Randall L. Englund*

Not much, was my answer to this question asked by a participant in a project management workshop. This person got it, that most everything we do, whether launching a space shuttle, developing a new product, introducing a new service, or responding to a request, is a project.

More often than not, a project manager has to influence without authority. It's been said we use only 10-20% of our mental capacity; I posit that we also use only a small portion of our influence capacity, maybe only 10%. If you could double your influence capacity, improving your capabilities by 10%, imagine the impact!

More gets accomplished, less stress, partners cooperate instead of resist, work is more fun—these are a few potential benefits. You can tame the naturally occurring chaos, not by making it go away, but by looking for patterns in human behavior and by applying a systematic set of process steps that lead to higher probability of project success. Because you apply this approach to more activities and improve your overall return on investments by treating everything as a project, you find yourself asking the same question, "What is not a project?"

Let's also assume that you have to communicate with others as part of your livelihood. You may be inundated by questions or requests for status. By understanding how people use the information, such as to make decisions or take a different course of action, you provide the right information at the right time to answer stakeholder questions, thereby facilitating progress instead of impeding it.

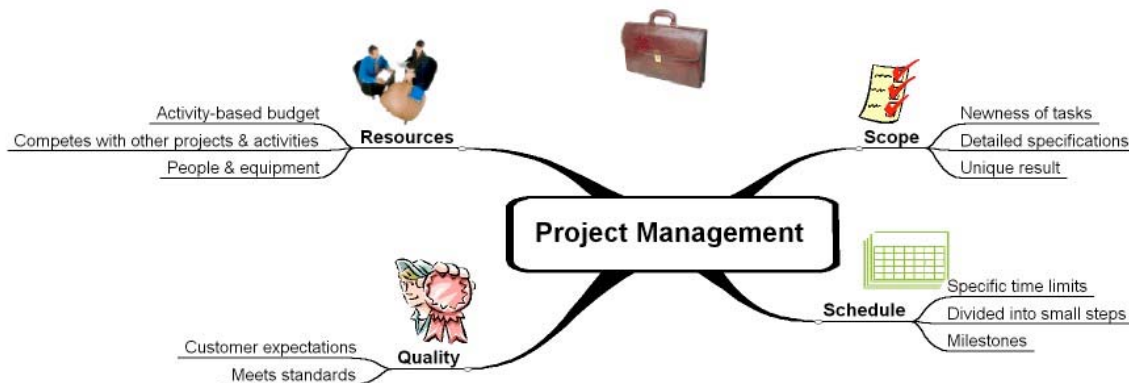
So if most of the things you do are projects, doesn't it make sense to learn about project management? But your bosses got the job done when they were at this point in their careers without all this stuff, right? Yes, they often did it by brut force, by the seat of their pants, by super-human effort

of many people over long hours. They probably didn't know there is a better way. Why not apply project management to most everything we do?

While project management has been around since construction of the pyramids, the profession of project management is relatively recent, arising over the last couple decades and especially in the 90's. Project management now applies to new product development as well as daily tasks.

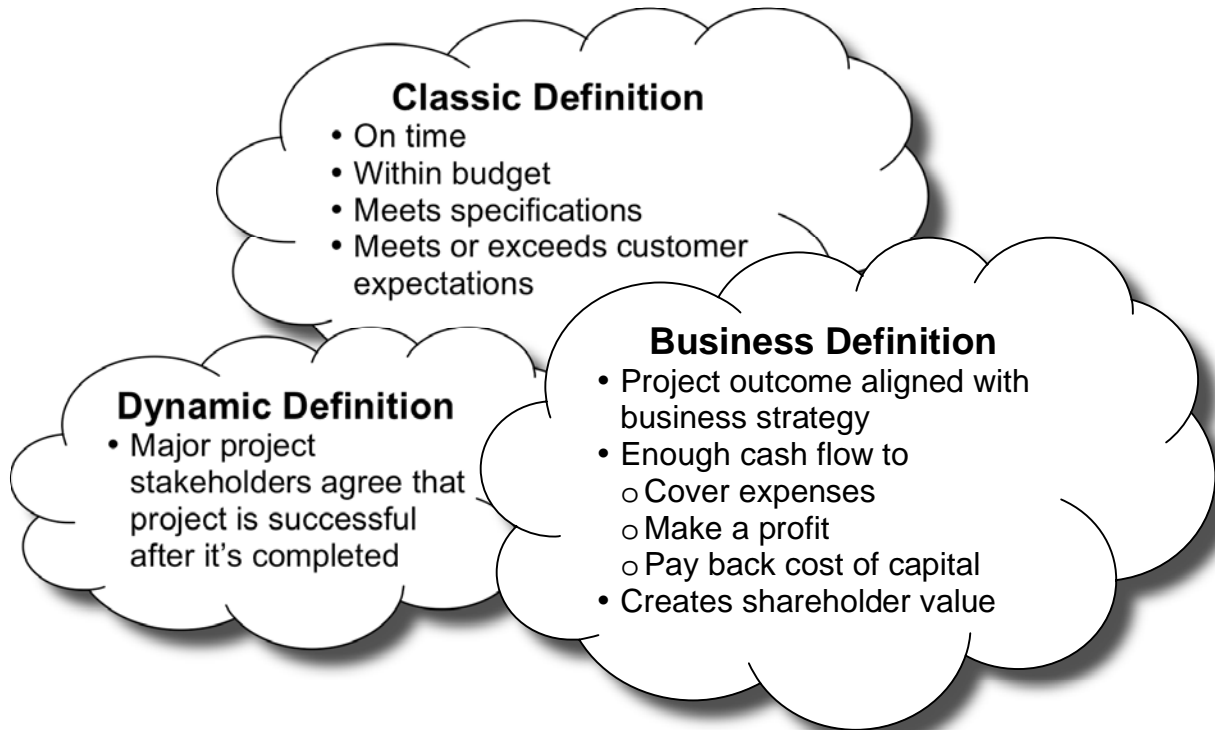
The Project Management Institute ([www.pmi.org](http://www.pmi.org)) has codified a disciplined body of knowledge, advanced college degrees and certification in project management are now available, and more sharing happens via newsletters, journals, and conferences. In essence, your boss (or customer) may not have had the benefit of this explicit knowledge and may be expecting you to follow the old story. You now have a new story to follow.

A project is defined as a temporary endeavor to deliver a unique product or service. It can be characterized by:



- A unique desired result
- One time process with specific time limits
- Activity-based budget
- Competes with other projects/activities for resources
- Uncertainty about results and costs

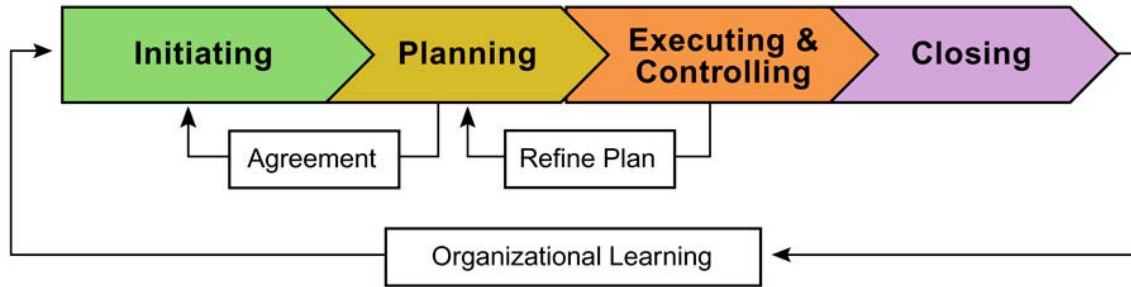
A successful project is recognized through several evolving definitions:



A key means to ensure a successful project is to ask key stakeholders, in advance, what is it they want from the project? Pin them down to one thing that that is most important to accomplish via the project. Then work like heck to make that happen.

For all endeavors that meet the definition of a project, it makes sense to invoke the process of project management and be successful. Everything else you can continue to do what you did yesterday or follow the recipe or leave it to chance or hope that somebody else knows what they're doing or.... Sure, sometimes it's fun to see what happens, be creative, and avoid structure. But when it's important that the outcome is done right or on time or within a budget, then you have a project and need project management.

Let's look at the process of project management:

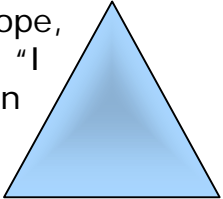


Some of the tasks that happen within each block are:

Initiating	Planning	Executing & Controlling	Closing
Conduct a situation analysis	Develop the core project team	Monitor project progress	Complete project documentation
Conduct a feasibility study	Identify project tasks	Hold milestone meetings	Conduct project review
Identify the involved departments	Complete work breakdown structure	Refine detailed plan for the next milestone	Record and share project experiences
Develop evaluation criteria	Develop a responsibility chart	Implement plan changes	
Select the core team	Develop a task network plan	Complete regular project status reports	
Write a requirements document	Identify critical areas (risk analysis)		
	Develop baseline project schedule		
	Identify the critical path		

The above items describe the technical side of project management. Now let us focus on a few behavioral approaches that permeate all activities throughout every project.

A requirements document includes a goal or project objectives statement. It says what you will accomplish, by when, and for how much. Get this statement clear and validated by your sponsor and partners, and you just made the work much easier. Many projects suffer the plague of vague goals, scarce resources, and impossible deadlines. That should become the old story. Many teams I've facilitated through this step in the process are amazed by the power of clear, convincing, and compelling statements of purpose, vision, mission, and goals. People finally understand exactly what the project is about. Discussions then focus on how, not what, to do. This invokes their creative juices and leads to more productive projects. You are now embarking upon the new story.

A project manager manages the triple constraints of scope, schedule, and resources. You may recognize the mantra as, "I want it good, fast, and cheap." But the reality is that you can provide two out of three. Work with the team and sponsor to prioritize the most important and most constrained element.  Is a deadline looming, such as a trade show, new product release date, or Y2K-like, that must be met? Or does the project require a set of specifications to be met, or do what you can within a budget constraint? Once you know the most important element, next identify the second most important, moderately flexible, and then the third, most flexible element. Use this agreement about priorities when making trade-off decisions. When creeping elegance appears, question if the feature is important for the first release or if it can be delayed to a subsequent project. When the customer pushes up the deadline, negotiate what features to drop. When resources are pulled away, arrange for more time to complete the project.

It takes courage to push back during these times. Act with conviction by drawing upon the universal interaction of these elements. They are laws that determine success or failure.

Do not set yourself up for failure by accepting impossible or unrealistic demands. You become more credible when you come from a data and

process driven approach, not personal preference. Constantly refer back to the project goal and your commitment to it when under pressure.

Many management mistakes are made at times of anxiety, such as rushing the planning process because it looks like nothing is happening. Use information to relieve that anxiety. Ask how your customer or stakeholders will use project information, and negotiate a project management information system that provides the minimum amount to answer their questions and enable them to take appropriate actions. The same goes for project metrics, in general.

Beware also of the inherent benefits to an individual of poor communications! For instance, hiding insecurities...not revealing mistakes...not wanting others to know what you are doing...getting more work dumped on you...being the messenger of bad news who gets "shot." Since these "benefits" are everywhere, take explicit actions to demonstrate that you place greater value on good communications. Encourage people to share their concerns. Put effort into providing personalized feedback. Reward desired behaviors.

Be authentic in saying what you believe, and practice integrity in doing what you say and for the reasons you say. These values and practices become driving forces that command respect for you as a project manager and lead to successful projects. One practice for making better decisions or judgment calls is to think five years in the future looking back on this time. Did you do the right thing, something that you are proud of? Or did you give in to short term pressures? If you are authentic in your goals and act with integrity, you are on a well chosen path, leading to no regrets. Persevere even when the pressure is on to act otherwise.

### **The Project Manager's Garden**

One may argue that much of what happens in nature is not a project, just ongoing cycles of creation and renewal. A fruit tree is a powerful metaphor and serves as a symbol for my consulting practice. A gardener has to create an environment for the tree to flourish—you cannot command a tree to grow. Likewise, people in organizations have to create an environment for project success.



A tree's root system absorbs nutrients from the soil; organizations develop theories from research. The nutrients flow through the trunk and into the branches and leaves; theories turn into methods and tools that create results. These activities are repeatable because they derive from a solid (known) foundation (roots and theories). Repeatable project success requires that you invest in an innovative infrastructure (theories, methods and tools) and then apply that practical knowledge to create results (fruit). We know that low hanging fruit is easy to harvest. More risk is involved to reach the higher fruit. Achieving greater results and a sustainable project management culture takes more effort.

The whole process begins with seeds and seed distribution. Seeds represent the potential for an organization. All growth starts small. It then builds linkages and grows organically. Additional growth comes from new branches on old trees. Success creates seeds that seek fertile ground to grow into new opportunities. Likewise, every accomplishment starts small and has potential, when nourished with project management, to make a big impact. A project is a way to help nature along.

Nature's approach is random and may not serve our roles in organizations. An effective project manager learns that overlaying the project management process on nature's ebb and flow is a powerful mechanism, capturing the best of both. You sense that something more than a chaotic environment is possible. Recognizing patterns of growth and people's responses to challenges and feedback are tools in your toolkit. You are flexible and realize there are many different ways to reach a goal. It's also okay to fail because you learn from these failures and immediately apply the learnings to your next project. Repeat or improve things that work, and stop doing or modify things that do not. You can hardly wait for the next project.

Ignoring environmental factors in a determined manner to achieve short-term success does not build a base for a long-term career. Instead, balance your approach towards performance (results), the experience of people on the project team, and learning. A single-minded focus on results may create stress, burnout, sabotage, and leave no time for learning. When this is the same pattern over time, it reduces the organization's ability to sustain a results orientation. Make an effort to set people goals, as well as project goals, and conduct project reviews, both during and at the end of projects.

A preferred approach is set a goal of:

- identifying stimulating project results,
- creating a positive, exhilarating, "this is fun" experience, and
- learning about people, group dynamics, new skills, ways to do things better.

Rather than becoming scarce, potential project members look at you and say, "Yes, I understand that what we're doing is a project, because it will create a unique new result within a reasonable timeframe, and I want to work on it with you."



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