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The Art of Productive Laziness

By **Peter Taylor**

'Progress isn't made by early risers. It's made by lazy men trying to find easier ways to do something.' Robert Heinlein (1907 - 1988)

In this article we will consider the essence of prioritising and remaining positive when facing problems in your projects; of addressing the challenges to our projects but in a 'productive lazy' way.

The benefits of staying calm in a crisis

Breathing Normally

You are on yet another flight, either to or from your latest project engagement, somewhere in the world. Maybe you have been lucky, maybe the flight is on time and you know your luggage is safely stored in the overhead locker, you are not seated in the middle seat between two sumo wrestlers and this flight does offer complimentary in-flight beverages.

You settle back in your seat and begin to drift in to that 'yet another flight' snooze, vaguely aware that the air hostess is, for the one thousandth time, explaining to you how to complete that complex conundrum of buckling and unbuckling your seat belt. You begin to disengage from the world around you...

But wait!

The lady in the uniform, vainly talking to everyone but knowing no-one is listening in return, is about to utter a supreme piece of wisdom.

'In the event of an emergency, an oxygen mask will drop in front of you from the panel above. Place the mask over your mouth and nose, straighten out the strap, and pull the strap to be sure it is tight on your face. After you are wearing it securely, a tug on the hose will start the oxygen flow. It makes sense to put your own mask on first, before helping others. Breathe normally.'

Breathe normally.

To begin with I used to think that this was the craziest thing possible to say. If I was ever on a flight where the oxygen masks were to drop down you can be sure that I would place the mask over my face, pull the strap as tight as possible, tug the hose until I felt the sweet taste of oxygen flowing. But the last thing I would do would be to breathe normally.

Breathe normally. Not a hope!

But actually breathing normally is really, really good advice. Being calm, wasting less energy, wasting less oxygen, thinking clearly and considering the situation in a reasonable, objective manner is absolutely what is most likely to help you to survive.

In the project world when all around you are going crazy with panic (and that may well include the sponsor), breathing normally will allow you to consider the situation, assess the core issues, plan a response and carry out the actions with the minimum amount of effort and to the maximum effect.

What is the productive lazy approach?

The Science behind the Laziness

The Pareto principle (also known as the 80/20 rule) states that for many phenomena 80% of consequences stem from 20% of the causes. The idea has rule-of-thumb application in many places, but it's also commonly misused, for example, it is a misuse to state that a solution to a problem 'fits the 80-20 rule' just because it fits 80% of the cases; it must be implied that this solution requires only 20% of the resources needed to solve all cases.

The principle was in fact suggested by management thinker Joseph M. Juran and it was named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, who observed that 80% of property in Italy was owned by 20% of the Italian population. The assumption is that most of the results in any situation are determined by a small number of causes.

The Pareto Principle or 80/20 rule can and should be used by every smart but lazy person in their daily life. The value of the Pareto Principle for a project manager is that it reminds you to focus on the 20 percent that matters.

Those 20 percent produce 80 percent of your results.

So, you should identify and focus on those things during your working day.

Do this well and you will enjoy the world of ‘Productive laziness’, even when things are going wrong in your projects – in fact, even more so at these times of crisis.

Applying the productive lazy approach

Stay calm in a crisis

So to begin with you must stay calm in a crisis, really, this is most important.

The majority of potential critical situations that you may well face in a project should have, in fact, already been considered as part of your risk planning and mitigation activity. If you have done a complete and proper job at the start of the project (you remember, that point in time when even the productively lazy put in a solid days work to get the project in the right shape to begin with) then you should have at hand plans of action for the majority of crisis you are likely to face. Each eventuality should have been considered, reviewed, discussed, planned and have a conceptually proven response defined by yourself and your project team.

Plan for the crisis

If so then for these situations you have at your fingertips a menu of actions that will mitigate or at least reduce the issues you are facing. No need to panic there then.

That will still leave a small percentage of situations that you either did not consider as part of your risk strategy plan (if so this will be a learning exercise for you for future projects) or really have blind-sided you because of their completely unexpected nature. Maybe the ‘Big Red Bus’ that is so often joked about really has caused mayhem for you?

Breathe normally

Begin by counting to 10 – seriously, try it. There is something in the human nature that says when there is a major issue identified that action is instantly required to resolve it. In reality a short calming moment will allow a better chance of considering the issue in a more complete manner, and this in turn will result in a decision of action that is more likely to address both the issue at

hand and any associated consequences. The last thing you want to do is put out one fire only to start another one somewhere else, one that could be worse than the first one.

Equally there is something else in human nature that can lead us to that ‘rabbit in the headlights’ state – that is frozen in complete inactivity by the oncoming crisis. With the project team looking to you to make a decision and set the required recovery plan in to action, you do nothing.

Breathe normally.

You need to be in control and you need to make the right decision, so look after yourself first – ‘It makes sense to put your own mask on first, before helping others’ – and once you are ready to consider your response to the problem then you should filter – filter – filter.

Filter, filter, filter

Identify the issue or issues and the source of those issues, and filter out those that either do not require you to resolve them or indeed are better resolved by others on the team. Nothing in the rule book says the project manager is the best person to deal with every issue, every crisis, and every threat to the projects success. Quite the opposite is true in fact. Don’t try to be the project hero all of the time, it is not your job and the move from hero to zero comes damn fast!

Once you have filtered the issue or issues then take the next step which is to delegate – delegate – delegate. You have a project team for a good reason, so use them, and use the breadth of their skills and knowledge to help you and the project overcome whatever is causing the problem.

Delegate, delegate, delegate

Remember whilst a problem shared is a problem halved, a problem delegated is a problem not on your plate right now thereby leaving you free to get on with your real job, consider all implications of any recommended actions ,and oversee the project being steered back to safety. Hurrah!

Your one true job is to Breathe normally. Don’t forget this!

Applying the ‘Productive Lazy’ rule I would personally aim for 80% of the issues being solved by others and maybe 20% of them being solved by you, or at least with you leading the resolution. You still don’t have to do it all on your own.

Prioritise, prioritise, prioritise

Even those issues that do end up on your plate may not need immediate and urgent action – maybe you have an issue coming at you but right now it is not showing signs of ‘clear and present danger’. If so you have even more time to think and consider before you act.

Deal with the ones that you have to and monitor the others that you don’t have to deal with just right now. For those that can wait a little while maybe you can consider options of action that are open to you and the team ready for future action. Gather insight from you team members, and any other source of knowledge that you can reach out to, and continue to do that single most important thing.

Breathe normally.

Final Words

So, it is all about ‘Breathing normally’ at all times.

- Stay calm in a crisis and one way to do this is to get the planning right, not to panic but to stay calm and therefore in control when you do hit a problem
- Always; Filter, filter, filter then delegate, delegate, delegate and finally prioritise, prioritise, prioritise each and every problem that comes your way, don’t try and solve everything yourself – use your project team
- Breathe normally at all times to make the right decisions in order to keep the project on track

About the Author:



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Despite his title of 'The Lazy Project Manager', **Peter Taylor** is in fact a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in project management, program management and the professional development of project managers: latterly as Head of Projects at a global supplier of performance system solutions, and currently as Director of a PMO at Siemens PLM Software, a global supplier of product lifecycle management solutions. He is an accomplished communicator and leader; always adopting a proactive and business-focused approach. He is also the author of '**The Lazy Project Manager**' book (Infinite Ideas 2009) – for more information - www.thelazyprojectmanager.com - you can also subscribe to a series of free podcasts on iTunes (The Lazy Project Manager).