

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINTS – AUGUST 2008

Condolences to the PMBOK® 4<sup>th</sup> Edition Committees

*By Edward Fern*

Shortly after World War I, the United States Navy was conducting an exercise off the West Coast near San Diego on a very foggy day. As a consequence, each and every ship posted lookouts at several locations around the perimeter of the ship. On one ship, the fellow posted all the way to the bow sent a message to the bridge that he saw a light. The bridge asked if the light was to the right or left of their direction and the lookout replied that it was dead ahead. The bridge asked if the light was moving or stationary and the lookout replied that the light was stationary.

Using its carbon arc lamp, the bridge signaled to the light ahead, “You are on a collision course, steer right 15 degrees.” Back came a message, “You are on a collision course, steer right 15 degrees.” So the bridge sent the message, “I am an admiral, you are on a collision course, steer right 15 degrees.” Back came a message, “I am a seaman second class, you are on a collision course, steer right 15 degrees.” So the bridge sent another message, “I am a battleship. You are on a collision course, steer right 15 degrees.” The response was short, “I am a lighthouse.”

When paradigms shift, those who are lodged in the old paradigm are likely to look ridiculous. Yet, most of us are very reluctant to let go of the familiar. With the Fourth Edition of PMBOK, we can clearly see that PMI has not considered the possibility that any new paradigm may be emerging. The new version still has the same twelve chapter headings developed for the 1996 Edition, twelve years ago when PMI was almost exclusively a North American/Western European organization. Those twelve chapters establish a paradigm that:

- precludes an approach to project management different from that of Bill Duncan’s 1996 committee,
- fails to encourage inclusion of material excluded from previous editions,
- ignores hard evidence that processes documented in PMBOK have become obsolete in the face of global competition, and
- dooms PMI to become a monument to a period in the development of project management rather than an instrument to extend its development.

In 1996, in the United States and Western Europe, project managers typically were handed responsibility for projects that others in the organization had already identified and concluded made sense to pursue. As a consequence, only project selection methods were covered and only as a tool in the development of a project charter. Were we to look at the project selection issue without the closed framework of twelve chapters, we might see that proposed projects are bundles of opportunities and associated threats and incorporate much of what is known about risk management in the project initiation activities of an organization.

All editions of PMBOK deal with the management of personnel resources. The management of inanimate resources, be they renewable or non-renewable, is given only cursory treatment. Indeed, if we look to the Third Edition Glossary for a definition of resource planning, we are steered to the term, “activity resource estimating.” The notion that alternative implementation strategies may be dictated by the availability or shortage of resources is ignored, again because the concept does not fit within the twelve chapter paradigm. Indeed, the text of the Fourth Edition draft gives no hint that this will be modified in any way.

In the midst of the current petroleum price crisis, we note that Detroit automobile makers lack fuel efficient models while Asian car makers have responded quickly to circumstances. Detroit will now design new vehicles internally and follow that with competitive bid procurement activities as described in chapter twelve of PMBOK. The terms “target costing” and “value engineering” are not any part of Detroit’s new product development paradigm and obsolete American anti-trust laws stand squarely in the way of any effort by Detroit to implement Keiretsu in order to compete in the global economy. As a consequence, the American automobile industry will join PMI as monuments to a point in time rather than as drivers of progress.

It is inarguable that the Project Management Institute has done a great deal to further and to distribute knowledge about project management. Prior to 1999, when both ANSI and ISO gave their blessings to PMI, no effort was too great in PMI’s quest to achieve recognition. Once those blessings were bestowed, however, PMI went from an offensive strategy to a defensive one. Suddenly any project management concept was evaluated as either “PMBOK compliant” or unproven. Techniques that made Sputnik the first artificial satellite and Yuri Gagarin the first human in space were put in the latter category.

So, the thousands of hours invested by hundreds of volunteers to produce the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of PMBOK will serve only to make the volunteers and PMI appear ridiculous. The fault is not theirs but, rather, the fault of human nature that clings to the familiar. PMI standards are developed by consensus, in just the same way that decisions are made in the executive suites of American automobile manufacturers. Thoughts that are not already deeply familiar to the majority are quickly consigned to the dust bin.

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Robin and Regine Slagmulder, Target Costing and Value Engineering, Productivity Press, 1997, ISBN 1563271729

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