10 Quotes That Make You a Better Project Manager

By Duncan Haughey, PMP

Over the years, various management gurus have come up with pearls of wisdom in the form of quotations that when given some thought, have a lot to teach us. Here are 10 such quotations that when heeded help to make us better project managers.

1. If it is not documented, it doesn't exist. As long as information is retained in someone's head, it is vulnerable to loss. - Louis Fried, 1992

As the saying goes, "What is not on paper has not been said", and no more so than in projects. A scope agreement can easily be disputed if it's not documented. An estimate may become a firm quote if not written down. A delivery date may change of not recorded. You get the idea. Whatever you agree, make sure you write it down and circulate it to all relevant people.

2. Why do so many professionals say they are project managing, when what they are actually doing is fire fighting? - Colin Bentley, 1997

There's a big difference between managing a project and running around like a headless chicken alienating your colleagues and upsetting your customer. Seems obvious, but it's a style of project management that is not uncommon.

Among the project manager's skills are the ability to plan, stay calm under pressure and manage a team to deliver a successful conclusion. I've never seen management by shouting, bullying and assigning blame in any list of project manager skills. If this is the way you manage your projects, stop! It's likely you're starting as many fires as you're putting out, and occasionally putting out fires you've started yourself.

Being a project manager means having a clear and well thought out plan and calmly leading your team to a successful conclusion while repelling anyone intent on upsetting your plans.

3. Get the right people. Then, no matter what else you may do wrong after that, the people will save you. That's what management is all about. - Tom DeMarco, 1997

Regardless of what project management skills you have, alone they won't deliver a successful project; your team does. When selecting a team you must recruit the right people, and by 'right' I don't mean best. The right people for a project are those that can deliver quality products and services, on time and on budget. Look for a mix of different skills and abilities applicable to your project, and not just paper qualifications you'll never need.

As well as the right skill mix; make sure your team members have bought into making the project a success and have the same energy and enthusiasm as you. To quote E M Forster, "One person with passion [on your project] is better than forty people merely interested." (Adapted)
4. You may con a person into committing to an unreasonable deadline, but you cannot bully them into meeting it. - Edwards, Butler, Hill & Russell, 1997

Agreeing is easy - anything for a quiet life. But wait, if you agree to unreasonable deadlines you're in trouble. Either, you're going to work your team night and day risking burnout. (They'll probably not want to work with you again.) Or, you'll deliver late and risk the wrath of your customer. Not an appetising choice. Alternatively, you could stand your ground when faced with an unreasonable deadline and show the customer why you need longer.

When faced with an unreasonable deadline make sure you have worked out an alternative date, checked it, and gathered all the evidence to back it up.

Agreeing to unreasonable deadlines creates a lose, lose position and is the cause of many sleepless nights.

5. Don't do anything you don't have to do. - Louis Fried, 1992

As human beings we often put off difficult tasks in favour of doing tasks we enjoy. We procrastinate and find reasons to do anything other than the tasks we should be doing. On projects this can be costly. It's important to have a clear plan, with regular milestones, that delivers on time and on budget. Carrying out any tasks that don't deliver the plan wastes time and money, and puts your project at risk.

Beware of Gold Plating, a term given to adding unspecified features and functionality to products and services in the misguided belief they will increase customer satisfaction. Stick to what delivers the project and dismiss that little demon on your shoulder encouraging you to do something else.

6. Ensure your documentation is short and sharp and make much more use of people-to-people communication. - Bentley & Borman, 2001

Have you ever received a large unwieldy document when you're busy? If so, I'm sure you'll recognise the tendency to put it aside to read later when you have more time. Nine times out of ten, the document goes unread, is filed, gathers dust and is finally discarded during a spring-clean.

Keep your documents short and to the point and it's much more likely they'll be read. Learn to say what you need to say on one page. Take the opportunity to talk to people. In this age of email, instant messaging, Twitter and Facebook, good old fashioned telephone calls and trips to the water cooler still work.

Keep it clear, concise and clarify in person.

7. A well-constructed project management workshop should give people a solid foundation to build on. - Bentley & Borman, 2001

It never fails to surprise me how many projects start without a proper kick-off workshop. "We don't need a workshop, everyone knows what needs doing", comes the retort. Often people hearing this find themselves wondering what their role in the project is, how it impacts them, when it will deliver, who the other players are and many similar questions.

Starting a project without a kick off workshop may save time now, but puts your project in jeopardy before it starts. A kick off workshop could be the most valuable meeting you have for your project. During the workshop you can communicate the project objectives, roles and responsibilities, review a draft milestone plan and ensure everyone is on the same page. It gives the opportunity for all participants to ask questions, and to clear up any misunderstandings before they cause problems.

To quote George Bernard Shaw, "The major problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred."
8. A task is not done until it is done. - *Louis Fried, 1992*

I've lost count of the times I've sat in status update meetings to hear the project manager run through a list of partially completed tasks. A task that's 60 percent complete is no-good to anyone. It's not finished, whether 10, 50 or 95 percent complete. Tasks are either complete or incomplete, and this is all that needs reporting. Remember, nearly there is **not** there.

9. Project proposals, business cases or cost benefit analyses are probably being massaged (either by underestimating costs or timeframes or by being very optimistic about the benefits) so projects will be approved. - *Bentley & Borman, 2001*

Getting projects approved at all costs is short-sighted. In fact, massaging the figures to gain approval suggests a belief the project will not be approved under normal circumstances. Be less than honest now and you'll be found out later. The best policy is to be honest about your project and it will be approved if it has merit.

10. Know when to cut your losses if necessary. Don’t let your desire to succeed be the enemy of good judgment. If Napoleon had left Moscow immediately, he may have returned with a salvageable army. - *Jerry Manas, 2002*

Most organisations have good processes for initiating projects; however most stop after initiation. Few have processes for evaluating projects mid-flow. This leads to many questionable projects continuing long after their value has evaporated.

All projects should include regular review points during their life when these questions must be asked:

1. Is this project performing well?
2. Will the successful delivery of this project produce the expected benefit?
3. Will any other projects have a negative impact on this one?

Without yes - yes - no answers to these questions, you need immediate action to bring the project back on track, and if that’s not possible, to close it.

**Finally...**

These quotations teach us a lot. They are the compressed wisdom of countless years experience. Keep them in mind and let them help you navigate your projects to a successful conclusion.

© Project Smart 2000-2011. All rights reserved.