

**Stop Playing Games!**  
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**Abstract**

Rick identifies and discusses the day to day world of a Project Manager. Project Managers have the unique ability to find shortcuts or workarounds in dealing with projects, sponsors, and stakeholders. This paper will try to help Project Managers avoid the playing of games through the sharing of years of experience and help them with getting stronger, more process oriented, and more respect for the work they do. Rick will offer real world advice, you'll gain proper techniques that you can immediately use to impact your projects, learn how to influence without authority, stop end rounding projects and get back to the basics that will help create a Project Manager that will do the right things the right way.

**Introduction**

Welcome to the new world of project management! For the last 30 years, project management has been struggling to find an identity. Many readers are searching for the answers to many questions. Questions like:

- What is project management?
- What value does project management provide?
- How do I perform project management in organizations that do not believe in the principles of project management?
- Why is that I am a project manager?

If you have asked any of these questions, are looking for new project management techniques, or are just sick and tired of the games that are forced upon project managers, you have come across the perfect paper. Project management is one of the most sought after yet misunderstood professions in existence. It seems that every organization is searching for a strong project manager and they are convinced they need one - until they get one! Project management is the only profession that is expected to bend both time and space for a living! Well today dawns the new era. It is the era of reality. It is the era that forces organizations to face the decisions that they have glossed over for too long. Welcome to the new era of project management!

To understand where this profession is going, we must first look at the current status of the profession. How did we get here? Why is this profession so misunderstood? The answer lies with two key items. The first item is for you to answer the question, how did you get in to project management? This is called the Halo Effect....gone wild!

**The Halo Effect.....Gone Wild!**

Literally, the halo effect means a perceptual bias where we assume that a person has many positive qualities if they have one positive quality. In essence, because you are good at one thing, you must be good at others. Figuratively, the halo effect means that since the person is a great developer, they would make a great manager of developers. The greatest example of the halo effect is to ask how many project managers started their careers wanting to be a project manager. The result is a very small percentage. Of course, project management is barely offered as a career path in many universities, so it may be a bit unfair to rate this as a halo effect. Yet many organizations and companies have selected project managers based on other skills that they possess.

During the research for this speech, 200 project managers were polled from various industries to ask how they became a project manager. Of those polled, 161 of them (80.5%) stated that they were selected to run a project while they were employed in another role and stayed a project manager. Only 8 of those that answered the survey stated that they asked to become or started their careers as project managers.

Where do you fit? Project management can be one of the most rewarding careers in the marketplace but it requires a tremendous balance of management techniques and political savvy. It is not simply a job that anyone can do, contrary to popular opinions. This brings us to the second item, not everyone can be a project manager. To rephrase this, anybody can be called a project manager, but not everyone will succeed as a project manager.

### **Not Everybody Can Be A Project Manager!**

Although most project managers did not start their career in project management, the belief that anyone can do project management is hindering the growth of the profession. For some reason, even though there are many parallels to other professions, project management is not given the same rank.

For instance, do you think a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of an organization would walk up to a second year employee and ask them, "Did you finish high school math? Great! We are short handed in accounting and I need someone to help close the books!" Isn't accounting just math? It is just debit and credits right? All you need to know how to do is add and subtract. This is obviously not the case. Accounting is a specialized profession that requires education, practice, and a thoroughness to do the job correctly. There are also certifications offered and it requires constant reinforcement and education in new laws and regulations. It is not something that you would trust to just anybody. However, the same CFO would pick that person to be the project manager of a project.

In the insurance industry, there is a profession called an actuary. This is a highly skilled position requiring a tremendous amount of research and analysis. Essentially, actuaries determine the classes and rates for insurance companies to price their products. To over-simplify the profession, they are legalized gamblers. Of course, this is a jest. Actuaries determine risk and perform an intensive amount of analysis. For life insurance products, they assess health histories, morbidity tables, and a tremendous amount of data to statistically group you in to categories. The hope is that the premium that is paid for insurance will be more than the insurance company has to pay out to ensure solvency. Do you think a CEO would walk up to an actuary and say, "I need to get a budgetary figure. Just throw me a number, I won't hold you to it!" Yet this is done to project managers on a daily basis.

It can be frustrating to work in a profession that is devalued so often. As stated in the opening paragraphs, it is time for a new era. It is time for project managers to start being recognized for the jobs they perform. If having the knowledge to add and subtract does not make you an accountant and guessing when someone is going to die does not make you an actuary, then creating a task list and holding a status meeting does not make you a project manager!

### **It Takes More Than Task Lists.....**

Project management is much more than creating and statusing a list of tasks. The application of project management and the personality style that it requires seems to be changing as well. It requires an even temper, phenomenal communication skills, and the ability to influence in all directions. What does it mean to influence in all directions? It means that a project manager may be reporting to the janitor on one project and then the CEO of an organization on the next project. It means that a project manager must understand the needs of their sponsor, understand the constraints of the project, and deliver options back

to the sponsor. In essence, it means the project manager is the processing unit of information for multiple inputs and outputs. It is not an easy task!

Most projects fail within the first five minutes of its existence. The reason is because most project managers accept the executive's direction at face value. When a project is assigned to the project manager and with the command that it must be done by June 15th for a cost of \$100,000, the project manager likely just accepts the instruction and moves on. They feel that because the executive said it, the budget is fixed and the date is fixed. While there are times that this may be true, it should be the exception, not the rule. Most of these misperceptions can be corrected with a simple statement. That statement is, "Let me know as soon as possible whether you think this can be done by June 15th for \$100,000 and if not, tell me what our options are." This statement will communicate that the deliverables are what is desired, but the organization is open to flexibility for the right reason. If the statement is not made, then many times, the organization is doomed to fail. Let me share an example.

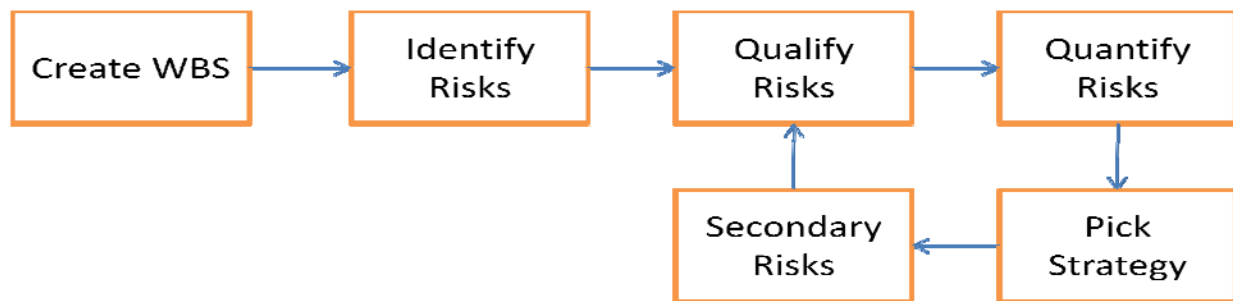
A large bank was implementing a new platform solution for all of their employees. When the project was assigned, the CEO stated that they wanted the project completed by the end of the year. Everybody nodded their head, did not say another word, and then started working on the project. This client had immature planning processes and felt that they did not have time to plan the project and should just get going. The project manager selected was one of the CEO's favorite managers and felt that she would be fantastic to lead the effort. Fast forward nine months. The project was not going well. The project manager was afraid to tell the CEO the current progress because she felt that she could turn the project around in time. The project team was disjointed and demoralized because they felt they were working twice as hard but did not seem to be making any progress. Almost every person on the project team knew that the project would fail, however, that information was not making it back to the CEO. Since the CEO had heard that the project was going well, he announced to stockholders the plans for the new platform at the end of September and that it would be live at the end of December. Now the company was committed. In order to make the date, the team all agreed that they would roll out the new platform on December 31 with the instructions, "Please do not use this software, yet." This way they could say to the CEO that the project went live at the timeframe promised. When the project team was surveyed, they were asked if they thought that this result is really what the CEO wanted. Astoundingly, almost all of them said it was. A couple of them said that they were pretty sure the CEO wanted it to work, but if he said December 31, he means December 31. Obviously, this is not what the CEO wanted. There was a crucial moment that this did become a project that needed to hit a timeframe to save face. That moment was at the stockholder meeting in September. The team knew the project was doomed to fail long before then, but the CEO was left in the dark.

This story illustrates many misconceptions that occur in project management. First, the selection for the project manager was not the right call. She was a fantastic manager of a department, but did not have the skills to manage people outside of her direct influence. Second, the dates were mandated to a point, but no options at any time were given to the CEO for decisions. Third, the project manager and team failed to give the proper status to the CEO. Finally, the team was heaving a "Hail Mary" on every play hoping to score when they needed to have a more methodical game plan. The unfortunate part of this story is that it occurs in almost every major company.

To bring this story back to the value of project management, many times we do not see the value because all we are asking project managers to do is execute poor decisions! They did not have the ability to select or influence the date, budget, or requirements of the project. Many times they do not have the skill set to understand what they are missing and are the wrong person for the job. Then the company looks at the project manager and the missed result and state that there is no value in project management. This practice is one that must change in order for businesses to realize the real results that are attainable.

## An Alternative to Apathy or Acceptance of the Mediocre

There are a tremendous amount of project managers out there that are frustrated. They have been trained in a process, we know that the process works, but the constraints of the organization force them to not be able to use the process. This book will teach much more than theories of how to become successful in project management. It will discuss how to determine the value of project management and give direct answers on how to stop playing the games that continue to de-value the profession of project management. Some may see these suggestions as the project manager playing games themselves. This is not the case. The tips and techniques offered in this book are to level the playing field and get the companies and organizations that do not value the process of project management to begin to understand why the process is what it is. The reasons that projects fail have not changed since we started tracking the causes. Neither has the ways to prevent common failures. Companies just seem to refuse the common principles of project management. The goal of the systems within the book is to expose the flawed thinking in a constructive manner that allows the education and implementation of the proper processes. As an example, let's look at the process of risk management. A simplistic view of the process as we are taught is:



However, in most companies the process is:



This is an oversimplification of the issues but is used as an illustration of what happens in thousands of organizations. Here are some actual quotes from sponsors and stakeholders on projects:

- "This project has no risk, because it must be done on time."
- "We don't believe in work breakdown structures here."
- "Our organization does not allow you to use PERT."

The unfortunate part is that you probably have heard some of these as well. Before we begin to explore some of the techniques presented in this paper, we assume the following:

- You understand the process of project management or if you have not learned the proper process, you will.
- You believe in the process of project management and understand what it takes to create a proper and true project plan.
- You will not accept status quo or failure as a norm.
- You truly believe that with the right techniques, one person (namely you) can make a difference in your organization!

To be clear, the intention of this paper is not to shortcut or bypass any of the standard project processes. It is offered as defined and tested techniques to allow individuals to teach their organizations to stop playing games and started reaping the rewards that proper project management can bring.

### **Game #1 - The Pricing Game**

In the popular TV game show, "The Price is Right", the final game is called the "Showcase Showdown." Contestants must look at a showcase and estimate the price. The contestant that is closest to the actual price without going over wins the prize. If the contestant gets within \$200 of the actual retail price, the win both! The contestant generally has roughly ten seconds to come up with an answer. This is much like a Sponsor passing a Project Manager in the hallway and asking them for a quick budgetary figure for a project.

How to stop this game:

- **Utilize PERT** - PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) is a formula that assists project managers in estimating the unknown. The actual formula is  $(\text{Best Case} + 4 * \text{Most Likely} + \text{Worst Case}) / 6$ . To assist in estimating and to thwart hallway conversations, utilize PERT. Throw out three to four numbers to the person asking the question to establish context and create a range versus a single number for estimates.
- **Use Risk and Risk Information** - It is difficult to fend off a hallway conversation. A key tip is to memorize the last two projects that went over budget. When asked to give a hallway estimate, try to use the past projects as reasons you feel uncomfortable throwing a number out.
- **Coming under budget can be just as bad!** - People tend to pad their estimates which is against true project management. Padding is a dangerous technique because it can cause an inflated budget, which in turn causes some projects to be rejected. This game is played every budgeting cycle and there are countless negative aspects to the practice.

### **Game #2 - Guess the Truth!**

Most studies of failing projects point to the inexperience of the project manager. I believe this to be true, but not for the same reasons. My definition of experience is how much information the project manager will share. New project managers engage in the game of covering up information or only revealing portions of the truth in fear that it will reflect poorly on them. The reality is that they often engage the executives by making them guess which one on the panel is truly telling them the right information. This game can damage the reputation of the project manager and do irreparable harm to the relationship with the executive.

How to stop this game:

- **It is what it is!** - Do not sugar coat any status. Do not fear telling the true status of the project. Eventually the truth will come out. Which side do you want to be on when it does?
- **Force the decision, ask for what you need** - Many times Project Managers feel the need to make a decision on a project. The reality is that many of the decisions should be forced to the executive level. The role of the Project Manager is to facilitate the project and keep it on track. However, when tough decisions are needed, it is the role of the Project Manager to present options to the Sponsor, not make the decision themselves.
- **Make assumptive statements** - Stop asking yes or no questions. They should be phrased as either or questions. For instance, do not ask if you can have three resources. Ask the

question with the consequence stated. The question is, "I need three resources or the date will slide four weeks, what would you like to do?"

- **Don't throw it if you don't know it** - If you do not know the answer to the question, it is perfectly acceptable to tell the person you will get back to them. Answering quickly with incorrect information can be detrimental to the project.

### **Game #3 - Password**

Project managers become creatures of habit. In doing so, we often teach our teams to have to only think or communicate about the project once a week. This is due to project managers falling into a rut and only communicating during the status meetings. If you have the "Password", you can achieve the project results that you desire.

How to stop this game:

- **Communicate often** - Make sure you are communicating with the team more than once a week in a status meeting. Make sure that you are following up on a regular basis to encourage the team to be more productive on the project.
- **Change your methods of communication** - So many Project Managers only communicate with the team in the status meeting. This trains the team to only have to think and discuss the project once per week. By performing personal visits, regular phone calls, impromptu meetings, and other variations, the team will be more focused on the project tasks.

### **Game #4 - The Right Price**

Project Managers often face the need to engage the services of other groups or are called upon to manage vendor contracts. There can be many awkward conversations about the value the vendor brings for the amount the organization is willing to pay. The conversation is generally, "How much will this cost?". The reply is, "Why, how much do you have?" There is an innovative new technique to define the two biggest variables for projects: scope and cost.

How to stop this game:

- **Pricing Estimator** - A pricing estimator is a variation of a WBS and PERT. It breaks down activities and shows common estimates. The customer can then choose the number of each of the activities they need for the project. In doing so, they are establishing scope for the vendor. It is an innovative new way to take the tension of cost off of the table and move right into scope.
- **Honest Conversations** - The most important way to get to the right price is to have honest conversations. Most people in negotiations are waging an inner war with themselves on how much information to reveal and what cards to hold on to. It is best to just put all of the cards on the table and have an honest conversation. Those that do will find that the business they receive will be a long lasting partnership.

### **Game #5 - Hit The Rodent!**

This game is one of the most frustrating for project managers. The game has to do with scheduling tools. For example, when you create a task and an assignment in Microsoft Project and then add another resource, the duration will cut in half. The project manager will then increase the duration and the date

will move. The project manager tries to move the date and then the work will decrease. Every time the project manager "hits a rodent", another one pops up!

How to stop this game:

- **Make an investment in learning the tool** - For every hour that a Project Manager spends learning and understanding the scheduling tool, they will receive many more hours of benefit. These tools are vital to success and must be understood to truly succeed as a Project Manager.
- **Without data, how do you know what you need?** - In Game #2, assumptive statements were suggested. It is impossible to know what is really needed on the project unless the time is spent and the data is accurate within the tool.
- **Forcing results in project schedules breaks the premise for the application itself** - For those that become frustrated, many will resort to manually typing dates in. This actually constrains the tool and removes all of the algorithms utilized in scheduling. If this is done, there is no possible way a Project Manager knows how long a project is going to take or what the current status is.

### **Game #6 - Marco! Polo!**

Most project managers have heard a sponsor at some time state, "We don't have time to plan, we must get started!" Welcome to the game of "Marco! Polo!" It is absolutely impossible to run a project without a plan.

How to stop this game:

- Running a project without a project plan - This is equivalent to sailing the ocean with no map or compass. How do you really know where you are going if there is no plan? You must insist to have time to plan. Running a project with no plan is the number one cause of project failure.

### **Game #7 - Armchair Quarterback**

One of the most dangerous games out there is the "Armchair Quarterback." This is a practice of project managers calling out other project managers. I like to believe that many of the readers would do the right thing if given the opportunity. Many of the games played are due to the hands dealt to them. Without understanding what had occurred, it is very dangerous for a project manager that is new to an existing project to criticize the outgoing project manager. This is a practice that must be stopped.

### **Rules of the Game**

Here are some universal truths of project management:

- **Always get to the data** - Data rules all. If I have more data than you, I win. Project Management is all about planning, analysis, and communication. Data is the most important aspect of all of those. Make sure you are always getting to the data and the utilization of the right data will make you wildly successful in project management.
- **Make sure you are following your principles** - If you are in conflict with your own principles, then navigating the project is going to be just as bad. Make sure that whatever you do, you can look at yourself in the mirror. If you follow your principles, then you will really reap the rewards.

- **Take care of your team** - Project management is about mobilizing teams to do things that have never been done before. Make sure that you embrace and take care of your team. They are the ones that are truly making you successful. Take care of them and they will take care of you.
- **Trust in your training** - Many of the reasons that projects fail have not changed in quite some time. Neither has been the way to keep them from failing. For some reason, we just continue to fail to utilize our training. The process of project management works! Follow the process, and you will win the game.

## **How to Win the Game**

*"You play to win the game!" -Herman Edwards, Head Coach, New York Jets*

Herman Edwards said it best. You play to win the game. The games that have been shared in this book are games that are consistently played across the organization. Executives, team members, and project managers have been engaged in this behavior for decades. What is amazing is the fact that we all know that these are the games, the rules of the games, and how to play them. However, we rarely talk frankly about the games and put a stop to them. It is time to start having frank conversations about statuses, completion dates, budgets, requirements, and the organization as a whole. Most employees want to see their business grow. They want to see the company thrive. If that is the case, then why do we continue to play games that are detrimental to the organization, profession, and the bottom line? The answers are trust and communications.

If you trust in your training, communicate honestly, and follow the principles of project management, you can and will win the game. The goal is to get the sponsors, stakeholders, and team members to stop playing games so that we can start focusing on honest conversations and true project planning. When the games stop, the companies win.