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## Project Manager's Survival Kit

by Terry Deacon\*  
CEO, ProjectPro Management Services

Project managers everywhere are increasingly called upon to finish projects earlier, within budget and with ever decreasing resources. With this sort of pressure on project managers to produce quality deliverables with ever decreasing durations and resources, we need to look at the survival tactics which should be employed to achieve project objectives.

Few PMs these days have the luxury of plenty of time to plan a project, as well as having ample skilled resources available to do the work. We are always spreading ourselves dangerously thin on the ground. So how do we survive under these conditions?

### Survive and thrive

You may ask why I am focusing on just *surviving*, rather than *thriving*. Surely a PM should aim to exceed stakeholders' expectations? Aim high for spectacular success!

Well, I believe that in the cut-throat business environment, to survive is to thrive! Ask the shareholders of Enron, Worldcom, Saambou, Regal Bank, LeisureNet and other recently failed companies if they agree.

Even the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) has become more modest in its definition of the aim of project management over the years:

- 1996 PMBOK: Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities in order to *meet or exceed stakeholder needs and expectations* from a project.
- 2000 PMBOK: Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to *meet project requirements*.

So, the bottom line for a project to be successful is to meet project requirements and thereby satisfy key stakeholders' needs as documented in the Scope Statement.

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### Pareto Principle

Applying the Pareto Principle is essential. This principle says that we should be focusing our attention and efforts on managing the *critical few*, rather than the *trivial many*. Vilfredo Pareto (1846 –1928), an Italian economist and sociologist who discovered the concept, found for example, that about 80% of our success comes from 20% of the things we do. Similarly, roughly 80% of the cost of a project comes from 20% of the items. The Pareto Principle therefore is also known as the 80/20 Principle.

By identifying those critical 20% of things, that I call the project manager's Key Survival Factors, you should stand an 80% better chance of completing your project successfully. There is a strong relationship with the Key Success Factors, but the difference is that Key Survival Factors are mainly under the project manager's control.

In this paper, I will attempt to identify the things which project managers (PM) should "pack" into their project survival kits. The Pareto Principle is the first Key Survival Factor, what are the rest?



## Project Management Principles

The next item to pull out of the PM survival kit is a set of essential project management principles. Have you noticed how often authors of books and papers on project management topics write about "project management principles", but fail to explain what they actually are? What are these much talked about, but difficult to find principles?

A project management principle could be defined as a fundamental, generally accepted and applicable truth or statement regarding project management, upon which more particular approaches, processes and methods, can be based, derived, understood and evaluated.

As far back as January 1994, John Bing authored an article in the Project Management Institute (PMI) magazine PMNetwork, that asked why the PMI's Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) does not identify the basic project management principles. Maybe it's because the principles of project management become apparent through the application of the practices. However, modern project management has been functioning as a profession for over forty years now, so it is high time that these principles are formally recognized, documented and implemented.

Max Wideman, a project management guru, is one of the few authors who have explored the subject of project management principles in any depth. He has drawn up a document entitled "First Project Management Principles" which may be viewed on his website [www.maxwideman.com/papers/principles](http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/principles) . The principles are:

- **Commitment:** An equitable commitment between the provider of resources and the project delivery team must exist before a viable project exists.

- **Success:** The measures of project success, in terms of both process and product, must be defined at the beginning of the project as a basis for project management decision-making and post-project evaluation.
- **Tetrad Trade-off:** The core variables of the project management process, namely: product scope, quality/grade, time-to-produce, and total cost-at-completion must all be mutually consistent and attainable.
- **Strategy:** A strategy encompassing first planning then doing, in a focused set of sequential and progressive phases, must be in place.
- **Single-Point Responsibility:** A single channel of communication must exist between the project sponsor and the project team leader for all decisions affecting the product scope.
- **Cultural Environment:** Management must provide an informed and supportive cultural environment to ensure that the project delivery team is able to work to the limits of their capacity.

The PMI in the USA recently started a formal project to draw up "A Guide to Project Management Principles". However, due to lack of resources, this important initiative has now been put on hold. Even the world's richest nation comprising 300 million skilled people has a problem with resource shortages!

Project Managers should apply the above principles if they are to survive and thrive.

## Create a support system

Everyone turns to the project manager for help when they encounter a problem. But whom can the project manager turn to when s/he needs support? One of the major reasons for project failure is a lack of management support, so it is important that a senior management representative be appointed to ensure that projects satisfy key stakeholders' needs.

This person is called a project sponsor. No, this is not the individual or entity that necessarily provides funds for the project - they are called the financiers. A sponsor acts as a crucial link between the project and the originating organisation. According to world-class project management best practices, an overarching key success factor is that best practice project management groups support the organisation's strategy by integrating their efforts with the corporate vision and strategy. This was a major conclusion of the PMI's research report "Best Practices of Project Management Groups in Large Functional Organisations". The research was the result of a Fortune 500 Project Management Benchmarking Forum carried out in the USA during 1995/6.

By virtue of their senior position, sponsors can help project managers to obtain scarce resources, remove obstacles, test ideas, and help solve problems. They can also play a mentoring role, particularly in a weak or balanced matrix organisational structure where the strong matrix position of project director or manager of projects is absent. Sponsors can counsel, recommend further training, discipline, or if all else fails, fire the project manager if s/he is still not performing. Another important

function is to feedback lessons learned from the operating life cycle of the project product into the quality management system, to ensure that continuous improvement takes place.

It goes without saying that building a committed group of supportive team members is a crucial survival factor. Pareto's Principle suggests that only 20% of project success can be attributed to the project manager, the team contributes 80%.

## **Check, check and recheck**

It's been said that the three most important things to do on a project are to keep records, keep records, and keep records. That's fine for winning your court case, but it won't avoid the crises or prevent wasting months (or even years) of time on litigation. I prefer the pro-active approach to check, check and recheck. Help others to meet their obligations by checking timeously if they are performing to up to standards

The Injaka Bridge collapse in Mpumalanga is a recent case study of the dismal failure to apply this Key Survival Factor. The Injaka Bridge in Mpumalanga collapsed on 6 July 1998, causing the death of 14 people (including the designer of the bridge) and injuring 19 others. Many of them were standing on the bridge deck as it was being launched. After four years of investigation, Adv Hans Fabricius and his legal team found both the consulting engineers VKE and the contractor Concor, negligent in a number of ways.

The causes of the collapse resulted from a long list of shortcomings and can be summarized as follows:

- Lack of competent personnel
- Lack of supervision
- Under-designed deck slab
- Steel launch nose not structurally stiff enough
- Incorrect temporary works slide path
- Incorrectly placed temporary bearings
- Incorrect feeding of bearing pads

All of the above mistakes could have been avoided had normal design and project management principles been effectively applied. Which leads us to the next Key Survival Factor.

## **Learn from other's mistakes**

We all make mistakes, but it is unforgivable to make the same mistake twice. We should all be on a continuous improvement crusade, preferably learning from the mistakes of others.

*"Hindsight is not vouchsafed the common man as he picks his course through life. This must be kept constantly in mind in a case like this one, where all is so obvious now." - JA Schutz in Durr v ABSA Bank Limited and Another, supra, at 453D-E :*

What lessons can we learn from the Injaka Bridge disaster?

- Anybody who undertakes the design and construction of a bridge should be suitably qualified and experienced to do so.
- There should always be a design review, irrespective of the qualifications and experience of the designer. Even the most competent designers make mistakes. The consequences of those mistakes can be avoided if another suitably qualified and experienced person checks their work.
- The engineer and the contractor should jointly accept responsibility to ensure that there is compatibility between the design of the permanent works and the contractor's temporary works.
- There should be launch procedures and competent staff from the designers and contractors present at the launch to make decisions when warning signs (like cracks) appear.
- Nobody should, for safety reasons, be allowed on top of the deck, or even in the immediate vicinity of the bridge while launching takes place, apart from the construction personnel required to perform their duties.

ProjectPro has published an in-depth analysis and lessons learned from the Injaka Bridge collapse on our website [www.projectpro.co.za](http://www.projectpro.co.za)



### **Keep It Straight and Simple (KISS Principle).**

We become too enamoured with unnecessarily embracing new and poorly understood technology these days (it's called the bleeding edge). Simplicity is the key to a successful, low-stress life. It's extremely frustrating when something does not work and it's beyond your capability to fix it. This leaves one with a feeling of powerlessness, which is stressful. Keep your communication, methodologies, tools and techniques as simple as possible. When there are changes to the plan, complex systems can be laborious to modify.

Getting back to basics is a good strategy to implement the Kiss Principle.



### **Back-ups.**

Projects are risky. No matter how well organized one is, things can still go wrong. So, back-up or contingency plans must be put in place *before* the risk strikes. A risk analysis with responses to mitigate the risk events is an essential survival factor. The Apollo missions to the moon had triple back-ups and yet Apollo 13 almost ended in disaster, due to an oxygen tank explosion. Even NASA eventually runs out of conventional back-ups and has to resort to ingenuity to survive (perhaps creativity is yet another Key Survival Factor).

Backing up your computer data regularly *and* storing it in a safe place (like a fireproof safe or bank vault) is a must. I remember an incident many years ago when

the ProjectPro magazine typesetters religiously made back-ups, but stored them in the same office as the computers. The office was gutted by fire, destroying the computers plus all the back-ups. Yes, the best lessons we learn in life are the ones that caused us the most pain.

It would also be useful to have human back-ups, just in case disaster strikes a key member of the project team. However this is prohibitively expensive, so what can we do about it? Communicate clearly and regularly, document all assumptions and keep good records. Which brings us to the next survival tip.

### **Buffers.**

Don't sail too close to the wind. Build in safety margins for time, cost and quality. On projects we have a budget contingency under the control of the project manager to cover poor estimates, mistakes, bad productivity, etc. The client should set up an additional cost buffer called management reserve (outside the reach of the project manager's grubby hands) to cover scope changes and *force majeure* aspects.

It's a great stress reliever to know that you are ahead of schedule. I build at least a 20% time buffer into my trips. Too many mistakes are made and accidents are caused when one is in a rush. As a wise old lady once said to me, "The hurridier I go the behinder I get".

### **The big picture.**

Raymond Ackerman, of Pick 'n' Pay fame, said in his book, "Hearing Grasshoppers Jump", that one of his survival tactics was to keep his ears so close to the ground that he could hear grasshoppers jump. This is important for gathering information on what's happening around you, but how do you keep your eyes on the big picture if your ear is on the ground?

Project managers are usually so focussed on monitoring and controlling time, cost and quality aspects, that they lose sight of the big picture. Therefore, get some help. The project sponsor, who is a senior person acting as the link between project and the client, should be scanning the business, technological and political horizons to identify trends, opportunities or threats. One of the major benefits of strategic planning is that it gives one a chance to rise above the daily humdrum and fire fighting to view the big picture. Project life cycles should have checkpoints or "Islands of Stability" built into them to review progress, benefits, risks, strategy and direction.

### **Sharpen the saw.**

Finally, the most valuable asset you possess is yourself. Make sure you are in the best possible shape - physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. Steven Covey calls this "sharpening the saw" which is derived from a story about a wood-cutter who was exhausted by using a blunt saw, but said he was too busy to take time off to sharpen it. Isn't this typical - we can't take off an hour a day to exercise, relax or

meditate, but eventually we get laid low for months with a heart attack - or worse, buried! As they say, the only difference between being in a rut or a grave is the depth.

A sense of humour is a great stress reliever that helps us to survive when things go wrong.

## **Conclusion**

Every project manager should invest a few hours of their time in the earliest phase of the project life cycle to determine what the Key Survival Factors are. Do it as a team exercise, because through involving people, they become committed.

Armed with the above survival kit project managers should consistently be survivors who don't get voted out.

*\*Terry Deacon is Chief Executive of ProjectPro Management Services, a consulting and training company offering NQF Level 3 to Level 6 project management courses accredited by the Services Seta. He may be contacted at 012 346 6674 or 082 557 3119.*

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[Back to top](#)

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