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The Five Ws of Project Management

Tim Arthur

February 18, 2002

If you were expecting an article on the who, what, when, where and why, this is not it. Consider this a refresher on learning to expect the unexpected by tattooing five powerful words on your project management muscle: Warm, Web, Watch, Wacky and Want.

Be warm.

Play nice. Everything we do summons our interpersonal skills. It's been said that each thing we undertake is weighted 80 percent interpersonal. I didn't buy this at first, but now I'm a believer. Unfortunately, project managers are typically driven by the science side of our craft. We compensate for interpersonal problems on our team or in our own skill set by throwing more science at it. Less than 10 percent of leading project management books confront this subject, but Paula K. Martin deftly handles this topic in the gantthead article "[The New Role of the Project Manager.](#)"

By the way, demonstrating good soft skills is hardly ever a quick fix. It takes time to earn trust, develop rapport and truly inspire. If you fail here, it's a setback. But don't despair; keep on trying.

Add interpersonal skills training to your list of personal improvement goals this year. Take a class, read a book. Better yet, ask someone you know that doesn't sugarcoat his or her honest opinion. You know who is usually right on the mark, in terms of the caliber of the insights. Go ahead, ask!

Build your Web.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. It's no surprise that internal networking is still more effective than Web networking. On the other hand, using the Internet or intranet to communicate your project status decreases the noise factor associated with dropped messages between you, your team, your customers and other stakeholders.

There are only a few formulae a practitioner needs to know by heart, and $[n(n-1) \times Rnf]$ is one of them. Since "n" represents the number of people involved on a project, there are 2,450 possible lines of communication eligible for a disconnect, based on an entire team size of only 50. Don't forget to account for the Relative Noise Factor (Rnf). If you could characterize your team as C-3PO, then give this a value of 1. But most of us work in areas that require multitasking, resource turnover and other stark reminders of the human constraint. While not fully scientific, you get the point. High-noise factors are great for rock concerts, but lousy for projects.

Building a good network of contacts usually happens on its own over time. If you don't have one then you're probably doing something wrong. Take a hard look. It matters.

Take stock of how you're exploiting the Web infrastructure, too.

Watch out.

What gets measured gets attention. This is the real challenge: Identify the smallest number of key measurements that provide the most amount of coverage so that you know if the project is healthy or not. For example, a measurement of "new risks opened" or "risks updated" means that risk management is constantly at work on your project. That's a good thing. It's your job to watch out for the interests of the success of your project, not to police your team off the cliffs of insanity. There's a big difference; choose wisely.

This one requires some extra effort on your part, but it's worth it. You can't keep track of it all in your head--you'll need paper or a system of some sort. Remember--less is elegance, more is a chore.

What are your key metrics? Are they current? Are they sufficient?

It's okay to be wacky.

People gravitate to those who smile. Folks who laugh draw people out of their office space. Let's admit it, project managers sometimes can be, well, stuffy. Break the norm. Enjoy what you do. Have fun, but don't forget that your team needs your professional demeanor to prevail. Bad taste is intolerable, as is making fun of others. Build up, don't tear down.

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This wacky coin has two sides. Despite our desire to drive perfect cause and effect, other stuff happens. So plan for the inevitable illogical and irrational. Go ahead and cut corners to simplify and accelerate the schedule, but don't compromise when it comes to budgeting contingency.

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In the article [Project Managers on the Edge](#), Edward P. Youngberg does a nice job reminding us of the detrimental effects of workplace depression. As you anticipate the wacky, you offset the project stress factor.

You've got to want it.

You can't fake this--it's got to be real.

None of this matters unless you have a hunger to excel. If you don't want to be the absolute best project manager around, then please, pick another vocation, okay? Wanting your project to succeed is cool, but really wanting your team to succeed, your customers to be happy, wanting to come in under budget and ahead of schedule is more than cool, it's awesome. That stuff doesn't happen just because you want it badly, you have to plan for success. It requires real energy and genuine passion.

Just because you've managed a zillion projects before, please admit that you're not expecting some sort of "entitlement," right? Re-energize your zeal, and want to succeed!

Tim Arthur is a project manager, manager and second line manager working for SAS, based in Cary, North Carolina . He's a PMP ('94) and earned his Masters of Science in Management of Technology from Georgia Tech ('99). He welcomes e-mail at tarthur@nc.rr.com.

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- Francis Bacon

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