

# THE INSIDER'S GUIDE



## Overcoming Organizational Dysfunction:

**Unlock the Value of Project  
Management to Get Work Done**

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## About the Author



Vicki Wrona, PMP, is the founder and President of Forward Momentum, LLC. She has over 20 years of leadership and project management experience, more than 15 years public speaking, and more than 15 years training and development experience. She has trained thousands of people, has mentored individuals and organizations and has authored multiple white papers and blogs. She was selected to serve on PMI's committee to write and review the PMBOK® Guide 4th edition and co-developed the program that won PMI's Professional Development Product of the Year award in 2007. She has served on the Board of Directors for the Texas Soaring Association. Her passion is equipping individuals and organizations with practical knowledge and tools so that results – and bottom-line impact – are consistently achieved.

## About Forward Momentum, LLC

Forward Momentum, LLC is a woman-owned small business (EDWOSB/WOSB) and Project Management Institute® (PMI) Registered Education Provider (REP). Since 2000, Forward Momentum has provided instructional design and project management, leadership, communication and IT training and consulting to commercial, government and non-profit organizations. Let us show you how our approach can optimize your learning experience, improve your processes or empower your team by emailing [dobusiness@forwardmomentum.net](mailto:dobusiness@forwardmomentum.net) or calling +1.972.489.2029.

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# Table of Contents

About the Author .....	1
Introduction.....	3
The Value of Project Management .....	4
Cultural Obstacles .....	5
<i>Fire-Fighting and Drama</i> .....	5
<i>Turf Protection</i> .....	6
<i>Miracle Workers</i> .....	6
<i>Unrealistic Expectations</i> .....	7
<i>Micro-Management</i> .....	8
Overcoming the Cultural Hurdles.....	9
<i>Overcoming the Hurdles: Fire-Fighting and Drama</i> .....	9
<i>Overcoming the Hurdles: Turf Protection</i> .....	10
<i>Overcoming the Hurdles: Miracle Worker</i> .....	12
<i>Overcoming the Hurdles: Unrealistic Expectations</i> .....	14
<i>Overcoming the Hurdles: Micro-Managing</i> .....	15
Recurring Themes for Dealing with Any Obstacle .....	17
The Key to the Culture Lock: Adaptability .....	18
References .....	19



# Introduction

There is recent research that demonstrates the value of project management at various levels of the organization, including employee satisfaction, workplace productivity, customer satisfaction, repeatable processes and business innovation. The challenge to effective project management may stem from issues within the culture rather than with the skill of the project manager.

We will call these cultural obstacles rather than barriers, because obstacles can be overcome, whereas barriers imply that they cannot. Specifically, obstacles such as a fire-fighting mentality, turf protection, expecting project managers to work miracles, unrealistic expectations and micro-management can undermine the value that project management brings and disrupts the business.

Fortunately, the project management lifecycle includes processes that can help project managers adapt and flex to overcome the internal obstacles and bring the benefits of project management practices to the organization. While there are similar actions that help to overcome or lessen multiple obstacles, the way they are applied may differ slightly. That said, this eBook closes with recurring themes, identifying those areas of focus that will yield improvements in multiple areas and bring about the largest returns.



# The Value of Project Management

Recent research has validated the value of project management in a variety of organizations. In the research study, *Researching the Value of Project Management* by Janice Thomas, Ph.D. and Mark Mullaly, PMP, the researchers found that in both public and private organizations there were measureable improvements in productivity and business outcomes<sup>1</sup>. Well-executed project management, which fits within the culture of the organization, creates repeatable processes that can lead to sustainable innovation through ever-improving efficiency. It improves communication between business units, improves the quality of the product, improves perceived value, manages risks, reduces cost and improves efficiency.

These are not theoretical results. Thomas and Mullaly's research showed 38% of the organizations reported improved customer satisfaction<sup>1</sup>. In a separate research study by the Center for Business Practices (CBP), the research arm of [Project Management Solutions](#), organizations using project management saw a 75% increase in employee productivity and a 40% increase in employee satisfaction<sup>2</sup>. These gains are realized in organizations that embrace project management processes. More details can be found in the [Forward Momentum](#) white paper, [Understanding the Value of Project Management](#), which explores the value of project management and the objections that are often raised with it.

# 38%

*reported improved*  
**customer satisfaction**

# 75%

*increase in*  
**employee productivity**

# 40%

*increase in*  
**employee satisfaction**

One of the main challenges to project management comes from the culture of the organization: the existing behaviors and processes that naturally take over as projects are developed and worked. Many organizations struggle with project management because they don't know which pieces to implement or they take an "all or nothing" approach. In their attempt to utilize project management practices, they run into cultural obstacles and end up doing things as they have always been done rather than leverage the processes to overcome cultural hurdles.

In this eBook, we will explore some of the most common cultural obstacles experienced during my 20+ years of project management experience, and present ways to overcome them using sound project management principles and practices.

# Cultural Obstacles

Cultural obstacles arise because certain behavioral norms exist that work against project management practices. The Oxford Dictionaries defines culture as:

*“...the attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular social group...”<sup>3</sup>*

Given that the root of culture derives from a Latin reference to cultivate (as in agriculture), we can further understand that culture fosters the growth of certain patterns of behavior because of how they are reinforced and recognized. Culture is very difficult to overcome, but not impossible. To overcome a cultural obstacle, you must first recognize the symptoms and systems that may be reinforcing it. Only then can you develop steps to overcome it. In this paper we will examine five common cultural obstacles:

1. **Fire-Fighting and Drama**
2. **Turf Protection**
3. **Miracle Workers**
4. **Unrealistic Expectations**
5. **Micro-Management**

As you read, you may recognize one or more of these traits in your organization. Consider the systems that are in place and the stakeholders you may have to influence to advance project management processes in your organization.

## 1 Fire-Fighting and Drama

One could concede that, on occasion, sudden changes in the marketplace or catastrophic events happen that cause the business unit to spin into a flurry of activity. Unfortunately, in some organizations, this is the standard operating procedure. This can occur in organizations where the focus is on immediate concerns rather than long term success and value, either due to lack of planning (resulting in perpetual reacting) or because activity is confused with accomplishment. In these organizations, fire-fighting



and high drama become the norm. This behavior is reinforced because the organizational culture rewards and recognizes save-the-day heroics and frenzied activity, even if the need for those heroics was self-inflicted.

Because preparation and planning are not rewarded, planners are seen as moderate performers compared to their frenetic, “heroic” counterparts. Projects that are well-planned and proceed without incident are perceived as the easy projects, rather than as a result of well-executed project management practices. Finally, it becomes difficult to find time to plan in these organizations because attention and energy is constantly diverted to the emergencies, real or perceived.



## 2 Turf Protection

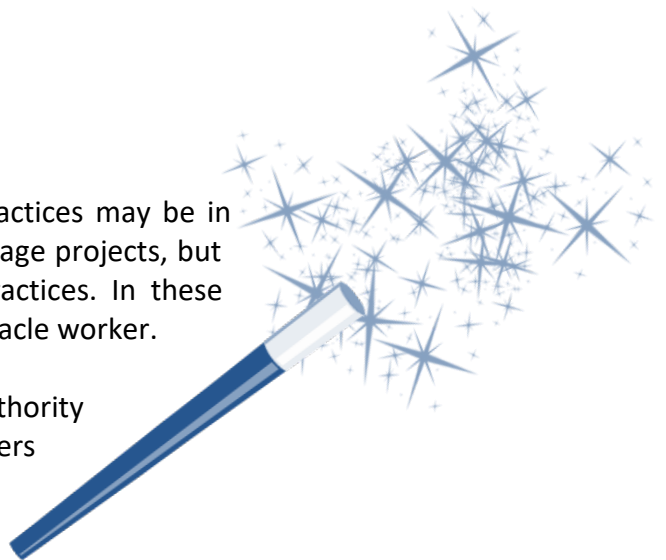
In most organizations, individuals often associate most strongly with their work group or functional unit. This feeling of esprit de corps can be motivational and drive performance results. It can also lead to over-protection of team interests or turf wars. Organizations that exhibit turf protection foster teams that value team structures over cross-functional cooperation.

Symptoms include an intentional lack of communication between departments or groups and minimal sharing of information between teams. There may be a low level of trust throughout the organization, and as such, people seen as outsiders will not receive adequate information or may be excluded entirely. More effort must be spent on influencing to become an insider than actually gets spent on getting work done! To be clear, this type of behavior may exist in individuals but not the entire business function or organization. In that case, it is a performance issue rather than a cultural phenomenon. When the symptoms are wide-spread, it is a true cultural obstacle.

## 3 Miracle Workers

In some organizations, good project management practices may be in place and project managers assigned to lead and manage projects, but there is little or no support in performing those practices. In these situations, the project manager is expected to be a miracle worker.

When there is no support of the project manager’s authority or in sound project management practices, leaders expect project managers to develop the plans and



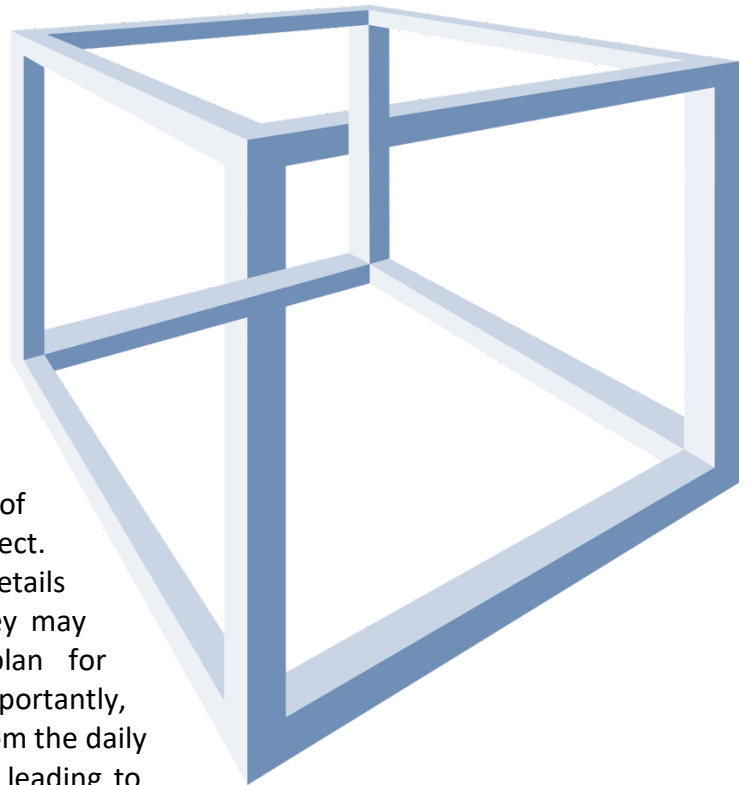
contingencies without leadership involvement or support. They often do not provide answers or directions in a timely manner, sometimes refusing to engage in problem solving or planning. These senior leaders expect their project managers to deliver a final result that is exactly what they expect or have in mind, but without their support or involvement. Project management may be something they believe drives convenience (“I don’t have to sweat the details”) versus accountability. Lack of support can be driven by lack of understanding, when leadership doesn’t really know what a project manager does or how they can help.

Project management may be perceived as a “necessary evil” and as such is likely seen as a necessary cost of doing business rather than a benefit. If project management is not valued, the culture will push back against the processes, timeline and budget, questioning the need for additional sign-offs, the time required for planning sessions and the costs of having additional people who speak a different procedural language. Things we do not understand we tend to fear, and in corporate settings, we translate our irrational fear into concrete terms of immediate cost and time impacts. For a deeper understanding of how the urgency of the immediate serves as a cultural obstacle, refer back to fire-fighting.

## 4 Unrealistic Expectations

When leaders set deadlines and deliverables that cannot be met, the culture suffers from the obstacle of unrealistic expectations. This can be caused by a variety of root causes. Leaders may believe that time estimates are too conservative or may be underestimating the effort and time required to complete the project. They may also believe that the project manager or subject matter expert (SME) operates inefficiently or too slowly, so their estimates are not to be trusted.

Another cause may stem from a lack of understanding of the intricacies of a project. Leaders often do not have insight into the details needed to complete the proposed work. They may not account for the time required to plan for disagreements, issues, risks and changes. Importantly, because they are at least one step removed from the daily work, they lack the perspective of the detail, leading to





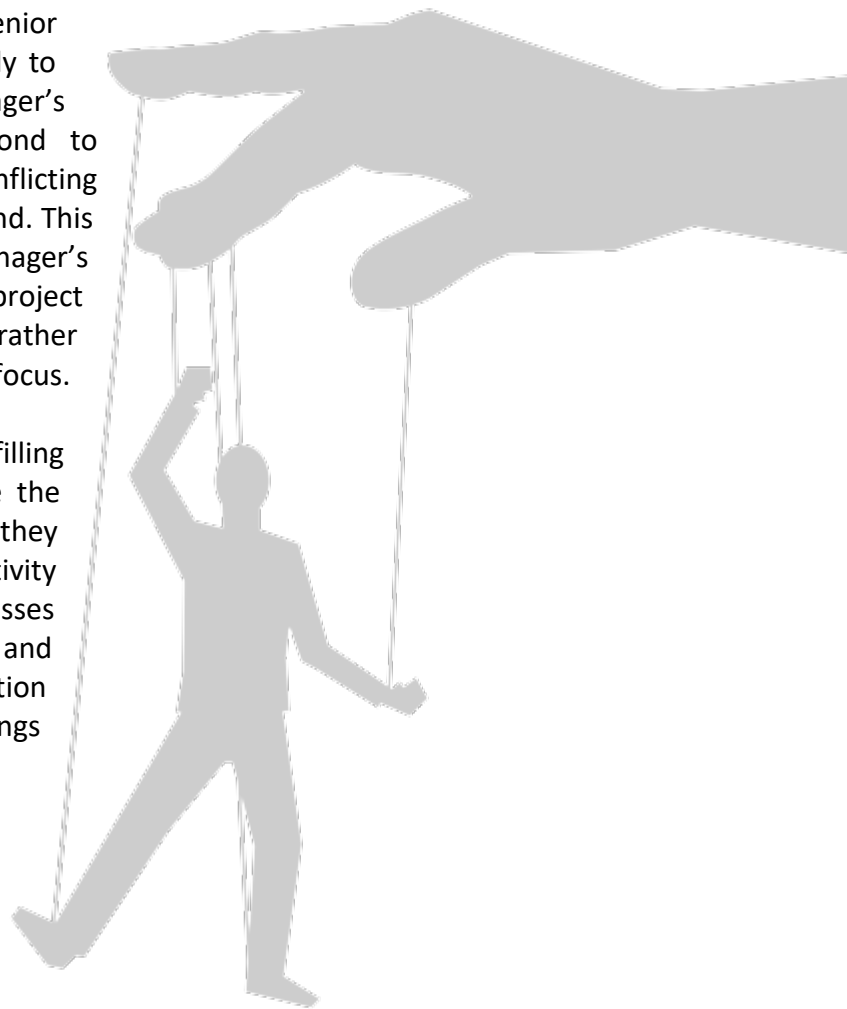
unrealistic expectations. It does not take much distance to lose this perspective.

Another phenomenon that may occur is that once a plan is in place with specific and defined resources and assumptions, leadership with unrealistic expectations may be inclined to reassign resources or change the overall priority and visibility of the project within the organization prior to project completion. They don't see a problem with doing this because they don't understand the impact of doing this.

## 5 Micro-Management

The obstacle of micro-management may arise in an organization where trust in the project management process or in the project manager is not yet earned. This obstacle restricts activity instead of unlocking creativity. It can seriously hinder the progress of the team due to the constant questioning of the processes and failing to work within the system. Because senior management leadership or clients go directly to team members without the project manager's knowledge, the team is forced to respond to additional requests, and sometimes conflicting requests, rather than focus on the task at hand. This action also undermines the project manager's authority. These requests often pull the project manager and team in multiple directions rather than keep them aligned on a singular goal or focus.

These behaviors can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of delay and distraction. Because the leaders or clients question the process, they interrupt the flow of the team and productivity suffers. When productivity suffers, the processes appear to be less effective. Senior leaders and clients then can proudly assert their conviction that project management only slows things down and adds costs.



# Overcoming the Cultural Hurdles

Fortunately, there are sound practices within the accepted processes of project management that can assist in dealing with these obstacles. To address each issue, there are steps one can take to reduce the negative impact of the cultural obstacle.

For each obstacle, project managers can take steps within each of the five process groups of the project management life cycle as follows:

1. **Initiating**
2. **Planning**
3. **Executing**
4. **Monitoring and Controlling**
5. **Closing**

Initiating and Planning will be combined and discussed as a unit rather than as separate items.

## Overcoming the Hurdles: **Fire-Fighting and Drama**



To overcome the drama and fire-fighting mode of operations with your project stakeholders, go along with the culture and use it to your advantage rather than fighting it. You can do this by accentuating the potential risk and creating a sense of urgency.

### *Initiating and Planning*

During *Initiating and Planning*, build constraints and time limits into the plan, including tight turnarounds in the schedule to keep everyone on their toes. Highlight all the things that can go wrong in order to bring attention to the risks. In this environment, risks can almost be a positive thing, motivating the team. At the same time, create contingencies for risks into the plan. Create an Agile-like environment with a constant stream of deliverables and quick turns, breaking down deliverables into smaller sizes where necessary. Finally, within the project portfolio, ensure that only the right projects are in place so scarce resources can be utilized effectively.

### Executing

During *Executing*, keep the pressure on everyone to keep them delivering at a rapid pace while building them up, making them feel like the heroes that the culture supports. Complete each sprint, keeping deadlines in the near term and demonstrating flexibility and adaptability. Communicate calmly and factually; stick to the facts without bringing escalated emotion into it. The organization values individuals who work through very difficult items, so be sure to recognize accomplishments and those who came through on truly difficult items, not just items they made difficult.

Fix negative variances as last-minute issues. If negative variances occur, don't get emotional or add fuel to the fire, because the culture will feed on that. Instead, recognize the variance, such as tasks are falling behind and the schedule is late, and calmly and factually communicate what you and the team are doing to fix it. Use contingencies, if applicable.

### Monitoring and Controlling

During *Monitoring and Controlling*, highlight the changes that are necessary, demonstrating flexibility and adaptability. Be prepared to showcase your flexibility and its necessity. Here, you will also be resolving issues, managing change, and addressing conflict. You shouldn't have to look far for these. On most projects, they find us!

### Closing

During *Closing*, be sure to record lessons learned. Document accomplishments and the risks that were avoided because of solid planning and action.

## Overcoming the Hurdles: Turf Protection



In this skeptical environment, it is important to understand what is driving territorial behavior. It might be a simple lack of communication, or it might be a true lack of trust. It is also important to know how ingrained the behavior is; it could be a newly developed trait or something deeply embedded and familiar. The lack of trust can also manifest as resistance to change. Regardless of the depth and scope of the mistrust, building trust is key to success. As the old saying goes, keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

### *Initiating and Planning*

During *Initiating and Planning*, seek out root causes of why people are resistant and adjust your reactions accordingly. Some questions to explore might include:

*Do they not like change in general?*

*Do they not like “this” change?*

*Are they afraid of losing power? Of looking bad?*

*Is this something the organization has tried before and it went badly?*

Based on your stakeholder analysis, decide the appropriate level of involvement during the various phases of the project. This is another time to demonstrate your flexibility and adaptability as you adjust your actions based on why each stakeholder or group is resisting. You might also adjust the timing of engaging stakeholders. You may actively involve some of them early in the process in order to allow them to participate in defining the new environment, educating them on the change and giving them time to adapt. On the other hand, you may decide to intentionally delay involving others until it is too late for them to seriously impact results.

In order to overcome the lack of trust, it is critical to create a reliable environment in which expectations are clear. Create a safe environment for all stakeholders, if possible, or at least for the team, if not. You can't change the organization, but you can create a safer environment on the project. Be clear about procedures so that team members know what to expect. For example, when approvals are required, how many signatures are needed to move forward? Does everyone need to sign off? Is silence considered acceptance? Demonstrate an inclusion mindset by engaging a broad cross-section of stakeholders while at the same time being very clear about roles and responsibilities. Also, define and communicate the escalation process. This keeps escalation issues transparent and above-board.





Ultimately, building trust is about building relationships. Let team members know that you are working for a win-win scenario - project success AND advancement of team members. The organization may not treat people well, but you will. Be a model of integrity and clear about your goals. By having clear expectations, communicating them up front and sticking to them, team members and stakeholders engaged with the project team start to trust in the process and outcomes.

### *Executing*

During *Executing*, clarify the path for engagement. Is it possible to go above or around someone who won't attend meetings or participate? You will need to step up stakeholder management efforts: set and meet expectations, deliver on promises and keep them engaged in all aspects of the project. Continue to work on building and maintaining a safe environment.

### *Monitoring and Controlling*

During *Monitoring and Controlling*, involve everyone, as much as is practical, in changes and decisions. The more people feel like they have a voice in decisions and procedural changes, the more engaged and less surprised they will feel. Even if they can't influence the final decision, knowing that they will be kept informed and learn of events first through you rather than be caught by surprise elsewhere will make a big difference. This continues to build trust. Be sure to close the feedback loop on various elements of the project. Reach out often to team members and stakeholders and have those difficult conversations sooner rather than later, even if you are dreading them.

### *Closing*

During *Closing*, as you document lessons learned, be sure to communicate successes. This stimulates ongoing learning and transparency. Provide reward and recognition for positive involvement throughout the process, not just at the end.

## Overcoming the Hurdles: **Miracle Worker**



When the culture is interested in results without active involvement by leadership, it is important to communicate the project risks and the impact of their involvement, or lack thereof.

### *Initiating and Planning*

During *Initiating and Planning*, document and discuss early what you need from leaders and stakeholders in terms of support, answers, direction, turn time on decisions and other deliverables of the project. Since leaders may be resistant to working through this degree of engagement, outline your needs in terms that will appeal to them, such as their WIIFM – What’s In It For Me/Them. Use internal or external data to demonstrate the impact of leadership involvement in successful programs, citing external studies and statistics if necessary. This reinforces the win-win aspect of their engagement.

A possible concern by leadership is that the project will take too much of their time, or more time than necessary. Explain to them that when you ask for their help you will also provide an estimate of how much of their time and effort you will require, assuring them that you won’t take more time or effort than necessary to ensure project success.

Also, share data on the risks of non-involvement. No leader wants his or her name attached to a failed project. Another selling point is that ongoing engagement helps leaders speak to the complexity and value of the program to their own leaders, helping to avoid the apathy that can result in misunderstood or disappointing projects.

### *Executing*

During *Executing*, continue to communicate progress with special focus on demonstrating the complexity of the project and highlighting risks, issues and actions needed. Even though the leader does not want to be involved, they want to know progress is being made. They need validation that their support of your project is not wasted. Keep communicating with them and to them at every step.

### *Monitoring and Controlling*

During *Monitoring and Controlling*, be sure to highlight any changes that could impact project success from their perspective. A good motto here is to avoid surprises, meaning your leadership is never blindsided by their boss or peers regarding an aspect of your project. You want them to be able to speak to any changes, issues or risks as well as any successes or opportunities as needed.

### *Closing*

Finally, during *Closing*, be sure to document lessons learned in order to better meet the needs of leaders as the project progresses and to influence the next set of leaders and stakeholders. Again, do not wait until the project is over to perform a lessons-learned, but do this throughout the project.

## Overcoming the Hurdles: Unrealistic Expectations



In this culture, it is important to determine and communicate detailed and *realistic* expectations early. Leaders and stakeholders need to be reminded of the complexity inherent in the project and what can reasonably be accomplished.

### *Initiating and Planning*

During *Initiating and Planning*, identify quick wins that can be quickly achieved to generate excitement and overcome doubts of your ability to deliver on ultimate project success. We need to demonstrate that we are capable of delivering, so that if issues arise that need leader involvement, we are not seen as whiners when we communicate those issues or our needs.

Highlight and communicate the work to be done using a graphical technique such as a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) to demonstrate project complexity and easily-overlooked details. As mentioned before, leaders that are as little as one step removed from a process often do not understand the complexity of the work to be done. You may also consider adopting an Agile-like approach so you can document successes within each sprint or short phase.

### *Executing*

During *Executing*, one of the most important things you can do is make progress against project goals. Deliver on the quick wins identified during initiating and planning, and highlight all progress with leaders and stakeholders. Enhance your communication approach to make everyone aware of tasks being done and progress being made. Manage the flow of work so that there are no slow periods or lulls in deliverables.

### *Monitoring and Controlling*

Because the culture tends to set unrealistic expectations, slight variances can cause big impacts downstream. In *Monitoring and Controlling*, watch variances carefully and adjust quickly, but appropriately, if you begin to see negative variances. As with firefighting and drama, be sure to communicate those variances and the plans to get back on track calmly and factually. Here is where we set ourselves apart from those seen as whiners and/or who cannot deliver.

### *Closing*

Finally, during *Closing*, document lesson learned. Highlight the actual work done and resources required to accomplish the goals throughout the project.

## Overcoming the Hurdles: **Micro-Managing**



Recall that this hurdle arises from lack of faith or knowledge about project management. Many of the tactics used earlier to build trust will apply to handle this hurdle as well. In this environment, clear expectations and communication are priority.

### *Initiating and Planning*

During *Initiating and Planning*, start by building trust early. Let clients, leadership or other stakeholders know you are on their side and that you will take care of them, meaning they will never be caught by surprise. Find out why they don't trust you or are unsure about you or your abilities. Remember, you may not be a "tested entity", yet, in their mind.

The key is to develop a process of "over communicating" without burdening the team. Be clear about the communication strategy: communication channels, frequency and types of meetings, frequency and types of reports, project goal, success criteria, escalation strategy, stakeholder engagement and the frequency of communications. This will provide clarity to the team and stakeholders regarding:

*Lines of communication and escalation procedures*

*How team members should handle direct requests*

*Meeting frequency that anticipates issues rather than reacting to issues*

*Provides detail to the appropriate level (not too high, not too low)*

Here, we are setting the stage on the processes that follow.

### *Executing*

In *Executing*, be sure to communicate early wins to stakeholders as well as anticipate the questions or concerns they may have. Anticipating stakeholder needs helps to keep them from approaching the project team directly. When working with someone who prefers to go directly to the team and consistently does so, recognize those times when they comply with your request to funnel requests through the project manager rather than interrupt the team. Also,



make sure that their needs are addressed to discourage them from going directly to the team in the future.

Identify points within the process where stakeholders and clients can be highly engaged (filling their need to be involved) and where they need to be hands off. Micro-managing leaders hover over the team because micro-managers dislike surprises. Combat this mindset by creating an environment of no surprises.

### *Monitoring and Controlling*

While in *Monitoring and Controlling*, involve appropriate stakeholders in change review and analysis. In the micro-managing culture, you will be required to support more involvement by more stakeholders. A higher level of engagement spotlights the work the team has accomplished and shows the efficiency and effectiveness of your processes. It may also require that you spend more time answering questions and orienting clients and stakeholders to the processes.

During the project, resolve as many issues as possible within the team. By resolving issues internally, you are assured that the team presents one message to stakeholders. When stakeholders see a unified team, they are not incited, and therefore less likely, to single out individual team members for project updates or personal requests.

### *Closing*

In *Closing*, make project archives available for review by clients and stakeholders so they can learn about the processes and decisions throughout the course of the project. Acknowledge leadership support. Document lessons learned throughout the project to drive continuous improvement during the project, and for future leaders and project managers to draw on in future situations.



# Recurring Themes for Dealing with Any Obstacle

You may have noticed several themes that occurred multiple times. It is reassuring to know that some of the actions we take, while potentially requiring slight customization based on the particular obstacle, will address several cultural obstacles. Here are a few of those recurring themes.



## Communicate

In all cases, communication is key, but there are nuances in how you craft your plan and implement it based on corporate culture. For instance, if you are dealing with micro-management, go into more details and communicate frequently to assure them. If you are in a firefighter culture, you can use communication to provide highlights - less detail and frequency based on accomplishments. If you are overcoming unrealistic expectations, in general, more detail is required.

Regardless of the culture you should always communicate:

*Current status/progress*

*Clear expectations*

*The benefits to clients and stakeholders (“What’s In It For Me” – WIIFM)*

## Plan for Risks

Planning for risks is critical to project success because problems can occur at any time and in any area of a project. Make risk planning as collaborative as possible. Ask for inputs from all organizational areas for the risk analysis. Keep everyone informed as challenges can surface at any time and solutions may come from unexpected sources. Be sure to engage external stakeholders, such as vendors and possibly clients, in this process as well, as they often bring unique insights to the process. Doing this will highlight the project management process and value.

## Document Lessons Learned

At regularly scheduled intervals throughout the project as well as at the end of the project, capture a written record of the lessons learned. Evaluate what went right or wrong during the project, and document the root causes and verifiable outcomes. Quantifiable results are more meaningful and easier to communicate than qualitative, anecdotal results; although, in some cultures, anecdotes carry a great deal of organizational force, especially when shared by senior leaders.

Lessons learned are recorded and should be communicated to the organization, not simply archived in a report that is never accessed again. These findings and results benefit current and future projects and project managers by laying a foundation of repeatable best practices beyond those documented as general industry standards. Specifically, focus on how those general practices can be adapted to work through your specific organizational obstacles to generate results within your organization.

## The Key to the Culture Lock: Adaptability

In this discussion, we tried to demonstrate that project management is a set of practices that can be tweaked and adjusted in order to adapt to the culture of the organization. In fact, even the Project Management Institute (PMI) states in its *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)* that, “‘Good practice’ does not mean that the knowledge described should always be applied uniformly to all projects; the organization and/or project management



team is responsible for determining what is appropriate for any given project.”<sup>4</sup> Every organization is different; savvy project managers must adapt best practices to fit within the organizational framework. By carefully adapting processes to fit the needs or the culture and by adjusting to the style of clients, stakeholders and leaders, project managers can work through organizational shortcomings to bring additional value to the organization despite the hurdles thrown in the way.

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