

# Uncle Phil's Guide to Becoming a Project Manager

*A humorous look at project managers and their projects*

16 February 2003

---

---

Little tykes may dream of being a fireman, a doctor, a nurse, or a policeman but I've never heard one child list "project manager" on their top ten occupational dreams. But then, we all grow out of our childhood fantasies. After all, we can't all be super heroes. If you are one of the rare individuals that dream of being a professional project manager, my hat is off to you (my southern upbringing ingrained into me that one should always remove their hat indoors – doubtlessly we are inside an asylum here).

How does one accomplish the goal of becoming a project manager? First you must acquire project management skills. Of course, there are quite a few individuals that have taken short cuts in to reach this goal. While not recommended, you can emulate their efforts. Learn the buzzwords, take the PMI test and get certified, and if you are willing to invest a couple of years into the effort, get a masters degree in the topic.

As a mere wannabe, you may not be familiar with the term PMI, the Project Management Institute. It isn't the asylum mentioned in the opening paragraph. The PMI is an organization of professionals dedicated to the goal of restricting the number of people that have the title of Project Manager (PM). This artificial restriction of supply increases the salaries or consulting fees they can charge. A very nice application of economic theory!

This restriction is achieved by insisting that wannabes, like you, memorize the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) and successfully pass a grueling testing procedure. Once the applicant has done this, a certificate is granted so you can apply to all those jobs that put that certificate into their job postings.

Degrees and certificates will give you the veneer of a professional project manager. You may even be able to get a job with the title of project manager. But when the time comes to 'belly up to the bar' with fellow PMs, your lack of true experience (as evidenced by your lack of war stories) will betray your lack of true credentials.

The only way to become a recognized project manager is to do project management. The book learning, certificates and buzzwords must be augmented by skills honed in the trenches where risk assessment isn't just a concept; it is the reality that failure will result in your panhandling for quarters, jobless, in a sleazy part of some backwater burg.

Throughout this treatise, I have rather inconsistently used the appellation PM as a title to refer to those that have achieved the level of a true project manager. This is to differentiate them from you, the wannabe and those that have taken the certificate and degree shortcuts to stardom.

I have distilled my twenty plus years of experience in the area into this exhaustive guideline, known as Uncle Phil's guide to becoming a project manager...

## **JUMP IN FEET FIRST!**

Volunteer to manage a really big project. Make it a project that no sane individual would willingly be even a part of. After all, a true PM can smell a loser from well over a mile away. They will avoid this type of project because they have developed finely tuned survival skills.

Real PMs will have snapped up anything that looks like it might be successful, leaving you, the wannabe project manager with little choice as to what is left on the plate. You have to start somewhere. Besides, this is the quickest way to start accumulating war stories.

Alternatively, you can push management to assign you the responsibility of multiple simultaneous smaller projects. Those that have already attained the lofty position of PM would turn up their nose at projects of this size. "That isn't even as big as the smallest task on my list", will be their attitude.

You will find out later in your experience that the bigger the project, the bigger the rounding error is. Experienced PMs know that a plus or minus five percent error allowance on a multi-million dollar project gives them plenty of 'wiggle room'. Small projects have very little margin for error and absolutely no room to hide in, two things you will learn to recognize and react to.

### **TRY TO GET PROJECTS THAT ARE SOMEWHAT IN THE SAME THEME.**

Trying to manage a software development project and a sewer line rehab job simultaneously may expand your experience base but it will do nothing for your stress levels. It can also expand your dictionary of acronyms. LPF means Liters Per Flush, a fact unknown to me until doing exactly what I've recommended against here.

### **ONCE YOU HAVE SNAGGED A PROJECT (OR TWO, OR THREE, OR FIFTEEN) YOU WILL LEARN THE FIRST BIG LESSON; YOU NEED HELP.**

Now even if you end up with projects that need as much management as a falling rock, you will need help. Despite what you believe up front, that falling rock will find that one place in the universe where the laws of gravity won't work. As a PM I have learned one inescapable truth, Murphy was an optimist.

Even when things are going smoothly, without help, you will not be able to assign tasks to your junior subordinate. That means when things go south (and they always will) you won't have somebody to help bear the blame. Blame divided is much more desirable than blame concentrated.

### **PLANNING IS KEY!**

The next big item you will learn is the absolute need for a project plan. Without one, you will never be able to see just how badly things are going. A plan demands that you have well thought out goals, tasks, and timelines.

### **COMMUNICATION IS LETHAL.**

A new project manager may make the mistake of sharing a plan like this with upper management. They believe what the books say. "The project plan is designed to communicate executive stakeholders". Just what is a stakeholder? Remember the heroes in those old vampire movies? Stakeholders are those guys out to kill the bad guy. Who is the bad guy? The fellow that tells them their executive goals will not be met on time or within budget - YOU.

Knowing this, and knowing that all projects go south at some point, just what is the executive summary of your project plan going to look like? How much detail are you going to put into it? PMs that survive from one project to another know the executive summary does not have to reflect reality. Software tools such as Microsoft Project enable PMs to create pretty charts that occupy the executives' time without cluing them in on just how badly things are going.

### **USE A COOL TOOL.**

After all, if no one can understand it, they may still be impressed. These software tools will take time to master and use, giving you the new project manager, opportunity to ask for even more resources. The more resources, the bigger the denominator and the smaller the amount of blame that comes your way.

### **THE REAL WORLD WILL GET YOU IN THE END!**

Somewhere along the schedule, it will become apparent that *the project can't be done in time*. A new project manager will be tempted to panic, communicate the facts upward to executive management, and feverishly attempt to put alternative action plans into play. This is the wrong move, grasshopper.

### **DO NOT ASSUME YOU ARE THE ISAAC NEWTON OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT.**

Experienced PMs on other portions of the project have probably come to the same realization much sooner, perhaps on day one. The big lesson you must learn to become a PM survivor is that you must never be the first to admit to executive management that your project will not make the schedule. That is certain death.

### **WAIT FOR SOME OTHER PROJECT MANAGER TO ADMIT DEFEAT.**

(Note that I did not use the title PM, anyone that makes this mistake never makes it to the level of a true PM!) Holding back takes the nerve of a WW II fighter ace. But you cannot blink. If you are serious about being a professional PM you might consider having your eyelids surgically sewn open. The staggering price of eye drops will be offset by the sheer pleasure you derive from watching (you won't be able to help it) young project managers being skewered by stakeholders. Remember, you must not be the first to admit failure, so hang in there, unblinking, and someone else will finally have to make the call.

### **DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT STUFF?**

If you find yourself staring first at your calendar and then at your watch as the last deadline approaches, and nobody else has called for slipping the schedule (a sure sign of professional project management) you will really find out if you really have the right stuff. All pretense and falsehoods will be stripped away. Titles and levels will disappear. In a flurry of activity in late night sessions it will be every man to the pumps and you and your team will finish the important parts project. Bells and whistles will be striped from the deliverables list and the items with the highest ROI (measured in terms of your continued employment) will be completed.

Having survived a project gone bad, you will have acquired project management skills, a war story worth listening to, and the right to be called a PM. It isn't the certificates, degrees, nor number or size of projects you have managed that makes you a PM. It is the experience of pulling out of a flat spin, cheating certain failure, and coming back to do it all over again.