

Solid advice for project managers

By Kay Wais, PMP

For our summer PMI Chapter newsletter I thought I would share some light, short tidbits of advice instead of a lengthy, deep article. Hope you enjoy!

To be a better project manager, take care of yourself physically and emotionally

Tom Peters says that every project deserves to be a “Wow” project. So if you don’t start each new project thinking, “I can’t wait to get going on this project!” you are doing your project a disservice, and you probably need to recharge your batteries. Your lack of enthusiasm will directly affect your project team. Your energy will be very noticeable.

Favorite ways to recharge include exercising, doing something to pamper yourself, taking sabbaticals, traveling, and finding things to do away from work that you truly enjoy. Project management is a high burn-out field. You are human and you are going to need breaks. Either you schedule them informally, or your mind and body will take them without your permission (coast on the job).

It’s summertime now. And living in the Midwest, our recreation opportunities are very attractive. So why not think about a few of your favorite ways to recharge your battery. It’s all for the good of your project!

Take advantage of International Project Management Day (IPM Day)

About two years ago I decided to become involved with the IPM Day through my mentor and the IPM Day founder, Frank Saladis, who said, *“IPM Day is intended to encourage project based organizations worldwide to schedule some type of recognition event within their organizations or coordinated locally with others to truly demonstrate appreciation for the achievements of project managers and their teams.”* And since he started it in 2004, IPM Day is now celebrated with high-level and local governmental proclamations, hundreds of events, and thousands of actions of personal recognition. Our own La Crosse Mayor has provided proclamations for IPM Day for the past two years.

The first Thursday of every November is IPM Day. This year it falls on November 3rd. Why not take advantage of this day and help honor the project managers that you work with and for? Go to www.internationalpmday.org for more information.

When possible, show up early at PMI chapter meetings and mingle to get to know other attendees.

It is pretty easy to predict if a new visitor is going to return to future PMI meetings by their body language within the first 10 minutes after they arrive. If they are visually demonstrating that “*I want to talk to people*”, they are there to network and they will get a lot of value out of meeting great people and they will be very likely to return for more.

Building your network and establishing business relationships outside of your employer provides you with connections that will enrich your life in many ways. Many of the people you will meet at PMI can mentor and coach you. All you need to do is get to know them and ask their advice. Some may connect you to career opportunities. Listening to some will help warn you away from working with certain vendors or organizations. All the information is helpful in one way or another. If you are only attending for the PDUs, we still want you to come – but you might as well maximize your time investment and get the much more valuable relationship benefits while you are there.

Use Mind Maps for Project Management Plans (and other kinds of notes as well)

I resisted, but was forced to start using mind maps when I started teaching project management in the accelerated learning program at Western Wisconsin Technical College over 10 years ago. And at some point I came to the realization that when I used mind mapping it caused me to actually think broader and much better. You see the process of mind mapping seems to harness creativity. The ability to illustrate through drawings and association adds a flexible structure. It gives you the ability to easily add ideas, emphasize points, and add connections between ideas. Due to the visual interest, it communicates much more powerfully than typed lines of text. A mind map can be as graphical as it is text-based (although mine tend to lack in illustration and artistic flair).

In project management, mind mapping is especially helpful when developing your stakeholder identification, requirements gathering, WBS, risk identification, and quality planning. I’m not yet a fan of a particular mind mapping software program. MS Visio is the program I use when I need it electronically. But I really like creating mine on white erase boards or paper at this time. Now given a choice between documenting the “old fashioned way” or as a mind map – not only would I choose to capture documentation in a mind map, I would also much prefer to review and reread a mind map for long-term memory and retention benefits.

Validate Critical Data

Often a project manager will inherit much of their project information. This second-hand information is highly suspect, as illustrated in the old children’s game where the story changes a little bit each time it is retold, until it is far from the truth. The information you inherit is always worthy of validating. Other times, even when the information was correct initially as time passes the project environment or facts

change. And the added benefit of this practice is to cause the sponsor to think a bit deeper about the issue than they did initially, and have the opportunity to change their answers.

Don't wait for somebody to “pass you the ball”

One fellow PMI chapter member who was job hunting vented that *“I have been waiting for someone to pass me the ball for a very long time now. Once someone does that, I will run with it.”* My comment back was *“you have always had the ball, but you don't seem to see it.”* I can understand how job hunting, and waiting for the next great project to start, and even things like submitting your name for a board position or for special recognition can all feel like somebody else has your ball. There you are waving your arms, but they don't seem to “get it”.

But you should not spend more than a fleeting moment putting your life on hold for a decision that may or may not be made in your favor. You need to have so many initiatives, interests, opportunities in the works, education programs you are learning from, and projects happening, that you are always moving your own ball forward regardless of any one decision or person.

Shortly after the ball conversation, the PMI chapter member went on to form her own consulting business. And after she starting making her own things happen, the job opportunities starting coming in and she took one of them. And I think the action of starting a consulting company, and landing a client, proved what these employers needed to see – that she could make things happen.

So in summary, enjoy your summer, put Nov. 1st (IPM Day) on your calendar, get to your PMI meetings early and meet new people there, use mind mapping for notes, validate critical data, and run with your ball.