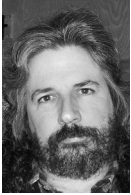ROBERT G. FERRELL

/dev/random: project management—a primer

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PROJECTS ARE THE CHIEF MECHANISMS by which modern companies dispose of their liquid assets. A great many guides to IT project management exist out there, but all suffer from one major shortcoming: none of them were written by me.

If you allow them, the "experts" will drone on and on about the insane intricacies of the project management process, because we as a society have a deep pathological need to reduce every facet of daily existence to incomprehensible PowerPoint bullets. Yet we are all project managers to a certain extent. Oh, I could sit in my (mammoth) ivory tower and toss off terms like *work authorization systems*, *duration compressing*, and *reverse resource allocation scheduling* to impress you, but I'm not going to, because that sort of yammer gives me a headache, not to mention the fact that I really don't know what any of it means. What I will do is give you, based on considerable life experience, a condensed overview of the typical project lifecycle that you can actually comprehend without an interpreter or prescription painkillers. I won't guarantee a positive ROI, however.

Phase I: Initiation

In this phase someone, usually someone with a key to the executive washroom and a tenuous grasp on reality, comes up with an idea that he or she wants to see implemented in the organization. The germ of this concept probably came from a trendy magazine next to the toilet, late-night perusal of an online forum, or a chimichanga with habañero salsa-induced nightmare. In the most toxic cases, all three.

The project manager 's job is to translate this executive hallucination into a plan that ordinary human beings actually have some minimal chance of eventually accomplishing, if not in fact, at least on paper. This brings us to Ferrell's Law of Projects: *Metrics Are All That Matters*, and its corollary, *Don't Sweat the Stuff You Can't Put in a Spreadsheet*.

Phase II: Planning

Now the game is truly afoot. The project manager will typically at this point plot out a rough course of action, establish a preliminary timeline, take stock of the available resources to carry out the various stages of the project, assess the likelihood of successful completion, and update her résumé. The veteran PM will begin vigorously to blur the

boundaries between reality and fantasy, even this early in the process, in order to obfuscate the stark nature of her preordained failure later on. Everyone who resides outside the executive suite knows the project as originally conceived has no realistic chance of succeeding, but all pretend to be merrily oblivious in order to keep their jobs. Project management puts the "funk" in dysfunctional.

A steady stream of pie charts, flow diagrams, slides, and even, in some extreme cases, three-color brochures on glossy card stock, will now spew from the PM's white-hot caldera. This torrent will not abate until implementation is well underway.

Phase III: Executing

As this phase gathers steam, all of the bric-a-brac has been ordered, has been delivered, and waits patiently in one or more piles nestled amongst the servers and network racks. If any new hires are involved, they are sitting in an HR conference room having several hundred pages of more-or-less incomprehensible employment-related gibberish folded into their brains like compost into a potato patch. The metrics geyser shifts from projections and cost-benefit analyses to adjusted productivity curves and time-to-maturity models. The PM begins receiving the occasional headhunter call on her cell phone. She answers any number she doesn't recognize with, "Mother, what's wrong?" and scurries into the ladies' room, janitorial closet, or employee cafeteria—whichever is closest—to take the call.

Meanwhile, incubation complete, the shipping containers have hatched and the embryonic progeny of the earlier phases takes a neonatal breath in the server room. Brightly colored cables slink in all directions. LEDs blink furiously. Configurations are configured, databases are populated, communications are debugged, users are authorized, and the information systems juggernaut lurches into ponderous motion. Another checkbox in the project timeline welcomes an inky resident.

Phase IV: Monitoring and Controlling

This is the period during which the newness rubs off and obsolescence sets in. At first it will be the occasional relatively inconsequential part that gives up the ghost, but soon the entire system will start to wobble and flap in the breeze like a decrepit scarecrow. Gradually, ineluctably, the stain of corruption inches forward while those few whose career aspirations have not yet been burned utterly from their souls begin to distance themselves from the doomed project. "I told you so" memos fly willy-nilly and damage control meetings are taken. Scapegoats are led from their pens to be groomed for ritual public display and bloodletting. The PM is taking "sick leave" days for job interviews.

Phase V: Closing

The name of this phase is a bit misleading. In point of fact, what goes on here is really more the preparation for the Initiation phase of the next project than the closeout of the current one, since by this time the systems constituting the old project have totally ceased to operate, with the hardware having been mined for any usable spare parts. The IT department has quietly reverted to the perfectly functional system that was in place prior to the ill-fated project. The users haven't really noticed, as the graphic interfaces for the two systems are virtually identical. The project manager has taken a

much more lucrative position elsewhere, and a new PM has been brought in to assess the unfortunate situation and assign all blame to his predecessor.

Over the next six weeks or so he painstakingly gathers the same set of statistics, user requirements, and out-of-context statements of dissatisfaction with the system that the previous PM had compiled and offers his conclusions in a presentation that matches the previous PM's almost slide-for-slide (he may even use the *same* slides). Having thus been briefed, executive management experiences another excursion into questionable cuisine, from which germinates the next in a series of brilliantly ill-conceived projects. Failure by design has become a critical element of the corporate mission statement. They're ready to move into government contracting at this juncture.

There's a process in cellular respiration that any undergraduate biology major could tell you about called the *electron transport chain* in which a lot of complicated chemical reactions take place in a specific order just to move electrons from one atom to another. That's evidently the model for the project management cycle: a whole series of interconnected complex activities the final result of which is the transfer of a PM from one company/department to another. The *manager transport chain*, I guess we could call it.

All hail Rube Goldberg, the father of modern business management practices.