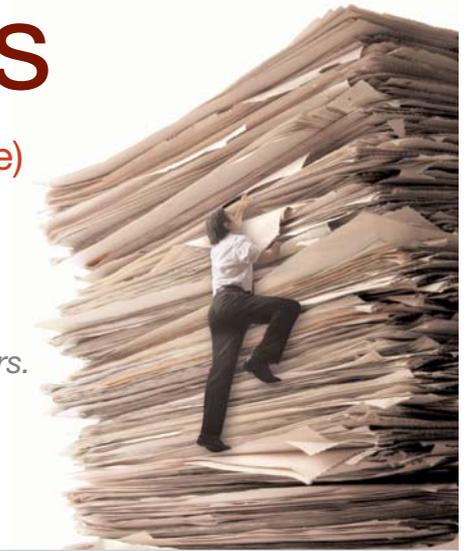


101 things to know about managing projects

(that they probably didn't tell you on the training course)

Having managed hundreds, if not thousands, of projects around the world, it seems to me that many of the courses and books on the subject are strong on flow-charts and jargon, but short on practical, real-life experience. So here are 101 things I've learned over the years. Several of them are easier said than done. Please let me know what your big learnings are. What have I missed?

by Roger Neill



1. **Think like a CEO, act like a CEO:** see the big picture, give clear direction, listen, understand, inspire, focus on achievement. The challenge, in the words of Lao-Tzu, is: "Can you love people and lead them without imposing your will?"

2. **Be passionate without being personal:** As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." And the choreographer, Martha Graham has said: "Great dancers are not great because of their technique. They are great because of their passion." If there are problems, and there always are, focus on them, not on the perceived shortcomings of individuals.

3. **Problems are there to be solved:** you need systematic, effective, collaborative problem-solving skills. Without these you really can't be a successful project manager. Sam Wanamaker used to describe his dream to re-build Shakespeare's Globe in London as an "epic journey through an ocean of icebergs".

4. **Be an outsider insider:** if you're an outsider, find ways of understanding what it means to be an insider, without sacrificing your outsider perspective. And vice-versa.

5. **The end is the beginning:** share a common goal. You need to be clear up-front where you're headed. If you don't know where you're going, any road will do.

6. **Spread the credit:** even if deep down you think it was in practice all you, it really wasn't. Recognition is, for most, more powerful than reward. The small ad in The Times for Ernest Shackleton's 1906

expedition to the South Pole read: "Persons wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success."

7. **Seize the day:** make each and every day a day of achievement. As English teacher John Keating says in Dead Poets Society: "Carpe diem...seize the day...make your lives extraordinary."

8. **Win friends and influence people:** read Dale Carnegie's fabulous book, still the best-selling, and the best, since 1938.

9. **Be the decision-maker's best friend:** you'll need to get timely approvals, the right decisions made, so get him/her/them totally onside.

10. **Shit happens:** in the best run companies, with the finest of colleagues, using Six Sigma or not. It's how you deal with it that counts.

11. **Take the initiative:** that's what you're there for. Get started. In the words of the immortal Goethe: "Nun braut mir unverzüglich dran!" If not now, when?

12. **Ready, fire, aim:** one way or another, try things out as early as possible, then learn from the experience and adapt. Now take aim more accurately. There's nothing like real life. "In choosing between two evils, I always like to try the one I haven't tried before", as Mae West put it.

13. **Do things, don't just talk:** project

management teams can take for ever talking. Get stuff done.

14. **Have everyone understand why you're here:** you're here to get the job done, the project brought to successful implementation. They need to really get that.

15. **Smile:** people will walk over broken glass for you, if you smile warmly when you ask them to do something difficult. "It is not at all necessary to be handsome or to be pretty," said the French actress, Sarah Bernhardt. "All that is needed is charm."

16. **Get prospects talking on camera:** it's more powerful than numbers in the winning of decision-makers. When Hearst magazines pitched the idea of an O magazine to Oprah Winfrey, they went to a shopping mall to interview people. She got it immediately.

"The secret of getting ahead is getting started"

Mark Twain

17. **Be curious, be very curious:** immerse yourself. Ask lots of questions, especially early on. "Fortune favours the prepared mind," wrote Louis Pasteur. Later you'll need to have more answers.

18. **Set the agenda:** have the team meet every week, if not every day. But budget the time and stick to it. When you ask someone to get something done, stay in supportive contact until it's accomplished (and recognise their accomplishment). Read *The One Minute Manager*. Patronising, but useful.

19. **Show and tell, not sell and sell:** selling puts other people, especially decision-makers, into defensive "buyer" mode. They'll nearly always find the fatal flaw and block you.

20. **Break it up:** "The secret of getting ahead is getting started," wrote Mark Twain. "The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming task into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one."

21. **Listen:** easy to say. Less easy to do consistently. Put yourself in their shoes. Paraphrase what you're hearing for understanding. (Some 90% of disagreements start out of misunderstanding.)

22. **Celebrate every step:** recognise the people with each important stage achieved. Don't wait till the finishing line.

23. **When "Yes" means "No":** for example, "In principle, I agree". "Broadly speaking I'm with you". "I'm warming to this". "Ye-e-e-e-s". They all mean "No". You need to find out what the issue is – right now.

24. **Bite the bullet:** if you've got a team member who is continuously obstructive and destructive, you probably need to get them off the team.

25. **Review the fish John West rejected:** The Beatles were turned down by Decca. Charlotte Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* by publisher after publisher. The photocopier by Kodak. The personal computer by IBM. See what's been turned down nearer home.

26. **The devil is in the detail:** often the failure of an initiative is not caused by the idea itself, but by some detail in its execution.

27. **Make connections:** Thomas Disch wrote: "Creativity is the ability to see relationships where none exist". Or, more accurately, where none has yet been discovered. These are often the "Eureka" moments. The thought that, while dry leaves are all irregular and take up a lot of space when packed together, but wet leaves mould to each other compactly, led to the creation of Pringles potato chips.

28. **See it through:** it isn't over till it's over.

29. **Take courage:** the legendary management theorist, Peter Drucker, wrote: "Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision."

30. **Talk plain English:** lose the jargon. It just confuses things. Words and phrases that I have noticed can be unhelpful include: strategic framework, parameters, deliverables, human resources, critical success factors, key performance indicators, value management, scoping, work breakdown structure, activity sequencing, SKUs, vision and mission. You'll have your own favourites.

31. **Get out of the office:** regularly. Go and meet the customers and consumers in their natural habitats. Ask open-ended questions, and shut up and listen to what they say and how they say it. Paraphrase back to them what you're hearing (to check you've understood them right).

32. **Sleep at night:** you'll do so much better the following day - in every way. "I realised that most of my best ideas have followed a good night's sleep," wrote the world's greatest inventor, Thomas Edison. Edison was the first master of the theory and practice of managing multiple innovation projects. He remains the one to study. Read *Edison: Inventing the Century* by Neil Baldwin.

33. **Be a good parent to new ideas:** Big Ideas, the ones that make a real difference, usually start out looking risky and impractical. They need to be nurtured, not murdered. As Einstein put it: "If at first the idea is not absurd, there is no hope for it."

ninety-nine percent perspiration." By the way, that one percent is essential.

36. **Discover hidden secrets:** you need to find the insights that market research isn't telling you and that competitors haven't noticed. "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" asked Harry Warner, boss of Hollywood's most powerful studio, in 1927. Oops.

37. **As simple as possible:** Einstein said things should be "as simple as possible, but no simpler". $E=MC^2$. This can be difficult if you've been trained in contemporary project management skills, which often seem to complicate everything impenetrably.

38. **Be realistic with deadlines:** if your deadlines are too tight, you'll miss them and engender a continuous sense of failure.

39. **Get naysayers on board:** they could be in your team, or in senior management, or heads of other departments. Identify them and involve them. American President Lyndon Johnson had it bluntly: "I'd rather have that fellow inside my tent pissing out than outside my tent pissing in." If you really can't get someone in your team on board, then see item 24.

40. **Don't wait for perfection:** you'll never get there. If we really wanted perfectly safe aeroplanes, we'd all be travelling by ship.

41. **Make it real:** then feel it, taste it, smell it, see it. There's no substitute for sensory experience of a prototype of whatever it is you're embarked on. The poet John Keats put it more succinctly in a letter: "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced."

"Problems cannot be solved by thinking within the framework in which the problems were created."

Marcel Proust

34. **Get focused:** push aside the non-urgent and the unimportant. Free up your time and energy for what matters. In the words of the inimitable David Brent: "I thought I could see light at the end of the tunnel, but it was just some bastard with a torch bringing me more work."

35. **See obstacles as stepping stones:** turn issues into springboards. Edison again: "Genius is one percent inspiration and

42. **Square pegs in square holes:** people do best what they enjoy and that excites them. So, with the variety of skills and passions in your team, make sure you're not asking the off-the-wall one to do the contracts.

43. **Give your colleagues an "A":** inspirational conductor and teacher Benjamin Zander gives all his students an A – at the start of the course. His belief in their potential infects them to give of their

best. Read his book, *The Art of Possibility*. In practice, at work, this means showing total confidence in your colleagues from day one.

44. **When it's me and when it's we:** encourage colleagues to speak for themselves, for me, and do it yourself when offering an opinion. But when you're talking about the project or the team, it's always we.

45. **Lead from the front:** roll your sleeves up. Get stuck in.

46. **Lead from behind:** don't spend your life doing everyone else's job. You need time to reflect, time to lead, and time to manage.

47. **Bring to the project everything you've learned in life:** my first job was as a shelf-stacker in M&S. Rich in experience. My next was as a mail-boy in a big advertising agency in London, J Walter Thompson, where I doubled and even trebled my paltry wages - as a rock musician, and as a poker player. Eighteen hour days filled with vital learning. My first new product launch was Jellytots. The brand just passed its 40th birthday - and it was my now five year old daughter's first favourite, just what it was designed to be.

48. **Tell great stories:** relevant, brief, compelling. The best way to share experience at the right time. But not of the "When I was at Saatchi's" variety, which I used to do. Boring.

49. **Earn respect, trust, loyalty:** these things can't be bought, can't be commanded.

50. **Get out of the pit:** sometimes project teams seem to live at the bottom of a pit without a ladder. Everything has been tried - unsuccessfully - it appears. Einstein wrote: "Problems cannot be solved by thinking within the framework in which the problems were created." Marcel Proust adds: "The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes."

51. **Embrace emotions:** it's not thoughts, it's emotions that drive people. Consumers, customers, colleagues, bosses, suppliers, family, friends. Everyone. (That includes you.)

52. **Bring consumers into the creative process:** for some reason, marketing people often think that consumers aren't creative. In fact, they are no more and no less creative than you and me. They just need the right environment to let it all out.

53. **Swim with the tide:** pick up new trends early. Try to understand if they will just be fads. These can be hard to assess. "The telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us," said a Western Union internal memo in 1876.

54. **Swim against the tide:** as Malcolm Muggeridge put it: "Never forget that only dead fish swim with the stream."

55. **Say goodbye to sarcasm:** it damages them, it damages your relationships with them, and it damages you.

56. **The sky is not the limit:** if it were, men would never have stood on the moon. The poet and artist William Blake wrote: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."

57. **Hold on to your hat:** when the joint is really rocking, it can feel dangerously out of control. Someone needs to keep a cool head. That's you.

58. **Be the real you:** not some over-trained, over-coached monkey, pretending to be someone else. "To thine own self be true," as Polonius advises his son Laertes.

59. **Relax:** if you're uptight, everyone around you will be too.

60. **Headline what you're thinking:** from childhood we learn to preface our ideas with extended preambles - "on the one hand this, on the other hand that" and so on. Get to the point up-front and ask others to do the same.

61. **Find the value in other people's ideas:** make a practice of identifying the pluses first. Then problem-solve any important issues. As Colette said to Martha Gellhorn: "You judge what you're doing even as you're doing it. That's fatal."

62. **It's the planning that counts, not the plan:** said Second World War commander-in-chief, General Eisenhower. How right he was.

63. **Abandon the Grand National course:** one of my clients, a world-leading drinks company, instituted a "world-class" new innovation process - worldwide. Problem was, where it had previously taken them six months to get new products into test market, it now took three years and more. Did their success rate improve? Afraid not. The jumps now were too many and too high, the ground too wet and boggy, the

course too long.

64. **Establish who's who:** who's really the boss? Who might be a problem? Who might get in the way? Who might sabotage the project? By the same token, who will be your best supporters? Who has invaluable skills for the task ahead?

65. **Widen the competitive frame:** if you're Coke it's not just Pepsi. If you're Google it's not just Yahoo. That way lies madness. (And the biggest opportunities missed.)

66. **Get through the dark night:** there always is one in any important innovative project. Sometimes more than one. The great 20th century poet, TS Eliot, wrote: "Between the idea and the reality... falls the shadow."

67. **Wish:** it always takes you beyond the known horizon. "The fantasies of one day are the deepest realities of a future one," wrote Scribner's magazine in 1877, celebrating Edison's invention of the first sound reproducing machine, the Phonograph.

68. **Be seen:** no offices, no doors.

69. **Tell the truth:** be open, honest, transparent, constructive. All the time.

70. **Value is the key:** to consumers and customers, to shareholders, to suppliers, to colleagues. Embody it. Create it.

71. **Learn, adapt, learn, adapt:** as the great Buckminster Fuller said: "There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes."

72. **Darwin rules:** he wrote: "In the long history of mankind (and animalkind too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed."

73. **Share information:** if they are to be peak-performers, your whole team needs to know what's going on, all the time, as do key decision-makers. Don't be in Eeyore's situation in *The House at Pooh Corner*: "Nobody tells me. Nobody keeps me informed. I make it seventeen days come Friday since anybody spoke to me."

74. **Facts are only current observations:** "Heavier than air flying machines are impossible", declared Lord Kelvin, President of the Royal Society, and one of the world's leading scientists, in 1885.

75. **Tap into dreams:** "You may say that I'm a dreamer," sang John Lennon, "but I'm not the only one." Pay attention to your day-

dreams – that's often when we are doing our best thinking. And to your night-dreams, when you're processing important, often stressful stuff in interesting ways.

76. **Shrink time:** competitors won't wait around for you. In the words of Macbeth: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly." Turn years into months, months into weeks, weeks into days, days into hours. Contact me and I'll tell you how.

77. **Sleep on it:** when you've made an important decision, see how it feels the next day before activating it. Tell people that's what you're going to do.

78. **Learn to work with metaphor:** "The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man", wrote Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset. The un-coding of metaphors has led to many of the greatest breakthroughs in human progress. There may be limits, though. As Walter Matthau complains to Jack Lemmon in *The Odd Couple*: "You just used so many metaphors, I forgot what the hell we were talking about."

79. **The future is a foreign country, they do things differently there:** as HE Bates might have put it (although he was talking about the past in the famous opening sentence of *The Go-Between*). So much traditional market research, stuck in the present, is unlikely to take us there. You'll need radical new techniques.

80. **Get help from experts and know-nothings:** both can help you solve problems, give you new perspectives. But remember, as Peter Ustinov said: "If the world should blow itself up, the last audible voice would be that of an expert saying it can't be done."

81. **Don't bet the company:** let's be honest - over 90% of innovations fail. So even if you halve that figure, you still want to pilot the idea, trying it out without risking bankruptcy.

82. **Respond today:** I've noticed that the best, the most successful CEOs always get back to me the day I email or call them. Names on application.

83. **Take time at the coffee machine:** quality time to chat with your team every day. By phone if you're geographically dispersed. Otherwise, let them get on with it.

84. **Learn to juggle:** expertly keeping several balls in the air at once is the hallmark of the good juggler (and of the successful project manager).

85. **Make a new task list every day:** priorities change constantly, so yesterday's list is just that. But take a moment to recognise what you achieved yesterday.

86. **Listen to your own ideas:** I asked Richard Branson what made him different. He told me he writes down every idea he has, night and day, and reviews his list every day to decide what to act on. As Mark Twain wrote: "Life does not consist mainly, or even largely, of facts and happenings. It consists of the storm of thoughts forever blowing through one's head." So catch them systematically as Branson does.

87. **Let the good times roll:** your job is to build and maintain momentum. Ride the wave.

88. **Wash whiter:** I worked in the marketing communications business at a time when people appeared to lose confidence in R&D's ability to create new consumer goods with clearly better performance. But that's their job, their reason for existence. It's still the case, and will always be, that, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbour, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door."

89. **New? I don't think so:** most of the best ideas have been thought of before and either not tried, or they had an unresolved flaw. The Wright brothers were by no means the first to try to fly. As Charles Handy puts it: "The trouble is, every time I come up with a good idea, I find Aristotle had it first."

80. **Let your light shine:** every day. In the words of Nelson Mandela: "As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same." People who are controlled can never give of their best.

91. **Play-work, not work-work:** most people still have jobs that bore them. As a project manager, you have the opportunity to have the most fun you can have with your clothes on.

92. **Create a highway:** project plans that I see are usually made up of multitudes of flow-charts, boxes and arrows, and forests of Post-It Notes. It's no wonder projects don't reach the finish line.

93. **Brainstorm together:** let it all hang out. No constraints. Anything goes. George Bernard Shaw wrote: "If you have an apple

and I have an apple and we exchange these apples, then you and I will each still have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas." This basic truth grows exponentially with skilled brainstorming. Getting Big Ideas is partly a numbers game. As the great composer Gustav Mahler put it: "I don't let myself be carried away by my own ideas. I abandon nineteen out of twenty of them every day."

94. **The bottom line is the bottom line:** in the end, it has to make a profit. If it doesn't, it simply was not good use of shareholders' money (public or private).

95. **Everyone can catch the ball and run with it:** we all have special skill areas to bring to the party, but Job Specs just get in the way.

96. **Clean up:** if the place is a mess. You'll all feel so much better. And institute a clean desk policy: anything left on desks overnight is thrown away.

97. **Banish the C-word:** in innovation, the C-word is cannibalisation. More time is wasted on this issue than any other. If you don't implement your idea because you fear it will eat into your existing business, some competitor will do it for you. Rowntree had dithered for years about Chunky Kit-Kat (and its feared cannibalisation of the core brand), before their acquirers, Nestlé, came in, launched it and doubled sales. They were lucky the opportunity was still there.

98. **Learn something new every day:** "I am still learning," the 80 year old Spanish artist, Goya, scrawled on a drawing. "Take lessons from everyone you meet," says Alyque Padamsee. I have certainly learned much from him.

99. **Be resolute:** determined, dogged, relentless.

100. **Leave behind a good feeling:** you did your job really well. You reached the goal. People loved working with you.

101. **This one's for you:** what have I missed? Write and let me know: articles@perdiemprojects.com