

The Laws of Project Management *They Are There for a Reason*

Can you afford to ignore the laws of physics? How about “we throw a ball up in the air and decide that it won’t come down”. Maybe we can even “will” it not to come down. Or maybe the apple won’t fall from the tree – at least not on our project.

The laws of gravity are pretty strict and those that attempt to ignore them will pay dearly. The laws of project management, on the other hand, are often viewed as defiable. Nevertheless, transgressors will be punished just the same.

If we eventually learn to respect the findings of Newton and Galileo, why do we think that we are not subject to the laws of Parkinson or Murphy? Although we often make light of these two chaps, Murphy and Parkinson deserve just as much respect as the scientific sages of yore.

Four Laws for Project Management

Below, we have selected four PM laws that require our strictest compliance. We will submit that these doctrines have a strong relevance to the success of project management endeavors and that to ignore them will cause embarrassment, pain, and other consequences.

Murphy’s Law

We will start with the ever-present Murphy. We all will recognize this ghost of projects past, who sneaks in a small disaster just where we least expect it. Murphy is remembered for declaring that on your project “**Everything that can go wrong will go wrong**”.

How do we deal with Murphy’s threat? First, we have to believe and accept that the threat is real. Denial is a common thread among most of the lawbreakers. It’s one thing to be innocent of the dangers. This represents poor execution of the work, but is not deliberate. But to actually be aware of a potential impediment to project success and to consciously ignore it borders on the criminal.

We deal with Murphy’s Law though the process of **Risk Management**. This process starts with Risk Identification, followed by Risk Assessment and Risk Mitigation. We identify the potential risks, temporarily ignoring judgment of how big a risk it may be. Next we evaluate the potential for the occurrence of the risk event and the impact should the event occur. If you place the risk events in a grid (high/low probability vs. high/low impact), you will want to pay special attention to those items in the High Probability/High Impact quadrant. Without mitigation, they may make the project too vulnerable to failure. Next comes risk mitigation. This involves identifying actions that can be taken to lessen the deleterious effect of risk events or alternatives to avoid or lessen the risks. Mitigation planning will often involve some up-front costs to lessen the effect of costs if the unmitigated event occurs.

Remember that with every opportunity comes some potential risk. You can defend against risk (and Murphy) by avoiding all opportunities. This will put you out of the projects business, of course. Or you can defend against risk by implementing a structured risk management process.

Oh, and just for luck, carry a four-leaf clover. It never did Murphy any good, but who knows.

Parkinson's Law

A gent with the mellifluous name of C. Northcote Parkinson gave the projects community a very basic, but powerful theory. He claims that **“Work expands so as to fill the time available for the work”**. This simple but profound statement has a far-reaching impact on how we schedule work and allocate resources.

Parkinson's Law presents a concrete argument against loading a schedule with contingency. Advocates of the Critical Chain (CCPM) philosophy also make this argument, but without bringing in Mr. P. Without going into detail at this time, let's just note that the CCPM method takes the contingency out of individual tasks and relocates it in buffers (where it is not considered to be available for the purpose of allowing the work to take longer than estimated).

I think that we can agree that schedule contingency is essential in most situations. But to place the contingency in the individual tasks exposes us to the effect of Parkinson's Law. For instance, a ten-day task (by estimate) that has been allocated 12 days, will take 12 days. Therefore, in the traditional CPM approach, I have continually recommended that dummy contingency tasks be strategically placed in the schedule to represent some of the time that would have been added to the tasks for safety. Practitioners of either this approach or CCPM have found that it is possible to reduce the total amount of contingency by sharing the contingency for a group of tasks in a single buffer. The result is shorter schedules with adequate schedule safety and reduced probabilities of the Parkinson effect.

Levine's Corollary to Parkinson's Law

We just noted that C. Northcote Parkinson said “work expands so as to fill the time available for that work”. In some situations, we can state that in reverse. That is, the workscope is reduced by the limits in time and money available to do that work. In some cases, we reduce the content or functionality of what is delivered. We may even eliminate an item in its entirety.

The Optimist's Law

We have all probably been involved in presenting or reviewing a business or project proposal. The business case is presented, often with three sets of figures. First there is the base case – that represents the expectations (or hopes) of what will happen if the project or business plan is implemented. Then there are the two possible extremes, known as the potential up-side (better than expected) and the potential down-side (worst case scenario).

All goes well until the presenter suggests that we ignore the potential down-side because **“the down-side won't happen”**. Perhaps he hasn't heard of Murphy. This is a certain recipe for failure. If the sponsor did the work properly, then the worst case scenario has to be part of the picture. But the sponsor may be afraid that the proposal won't be approved if the down-side is presented. Or the sponsor is an optimist (rather than a pragmatist). I do not want to put my money and resources on a false picture or on an opportunity that depends on prayer or luck to make its target benefits.

The potential down-side has to be considered. If, after looking at all scenarios, the proposal appears to be promising, then the team must apply risk mitigation techniques to minimize the possible damage from down-side events. If the down-side potential is ignored, then the risk mitigation is not performed and the potential for harm from down-side events is increased.

The message: Challenge anyone who says, “the down-side won’t happen”.

Harvey’s Hypothesis

Implementing a project management capability is far from being easy. It is an entirely new discipline. Yet, many firms fail to recognize this and attempt to build this capability by cross-training people that have other specialties, or even worse – just assigning people to project management roles without any training at all. And the effort often fails.

Even with qualified project management personnel, the reluctance to organize properly for project management has hampered the successful implementation of the project management function. It took a while for project management to gain recognition as a unique and valuable discipline, but it has now achieved a well-deserved professional status.

Still, some firms can’t quite take project management seriously, and implementation failures still occur. I have no doubt as to why this happens.

The failures in implementing PM can be traced back to this simple misconception: that we can take shortcuts with PM -- that we can treat it casually and unprofessionally -- and still have it work.

Famous Last Words

- Nothing can go wrong (The Titanic Syndrome)
- We do not need a backup plan (The Denver International Airport Syndrome)
- The downside won’t happen (The Optimist’s Syndrome)
- We do not have enough contingency (He never heard of Parkinson)
- We do not need any contingency (She never came in on schedule or below budget)
- Anyone can do project management – and in their spare time. All we need to do is a little cross-training (The “I won’t commit to PM” Syndrome)

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