



“Scrappy Project Management®” Book Excerpt

The 12 Predictable and Avoidable
Pitfalls Every Project Faces

By Kimberly Wiefling

**Subset of the book brought
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C o n t e n t s

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Preface

There are plenty of books that attempt to explain how to be a successful project manager. The Project Management Institute (PMI) has created an entire “Body of Knowledge” — the PMBOK — that codifies a neat, clean, surgical description of how a project should be managed from start to finish. It’s a nice concept, and in an ideal world these strategies might actually work. In our world, the project leader may not even be involved in the project kick-off, less-than-ready-to-ship products are launched prematurely, and projects run a torturous route that barely resembles the neat, tidy, well-defined process described in the PMBOK.

Real projects are messy! The PMBOK is the #1 best selling project management book on Amazon. That’s like having the dictionary being the #1 best selling book in English literature! Scrappy Project Managers know that the PMBOK is a sanitized version of what happens in the real world. It’s only the beginning of what it takes to get the job done. My first project management instructor told me, “Get complete, accurate, and validated requirements at the start of the project.” This is excellent in theory, and I’d love to work on a project where we have this luxury. Mind you, people in hell want ice water too. That’s not happening either. It’s just wishful thinking, and that just doesn’t cut it in many of the hurricane-like project climates out there. In fact, there are now entire methodologies that

specifically recommend not waiting until requirements are complete before implementing them.

Many projects start in the deep recesses of some corporate hallway, or over a beer in some dank little pub. Sometimes the project manager only hears about the project long after it is well under way. Even when a project is carefully planned and formally kicked off, the plan usually changes before the ink is dry on the paper. After that it's victory by successive approximation to an ever-evolving goal. Waterfalls of sequential project tasks have been replaced by cyclones of rapid iteration and massively parallel projects. In the real world, from the time the starting gun is fired, all manner of changes, surprises, and disasters befall a typical project. Teams struggle to keep their footing on the quicksand of rapidly-shifting markets, customer whims, and the vicissitudes of circumstance. Have you ever been on a project where nothing changed? Me neither, so why be surprised when there are changes to requirements, dates, budgets, or staff? Forget the light at the end of the tunnel. It's usually just a break between tunnels. Learn to love the tunnel!

Change is expected. It need not be the surprise guest at your project dinner party. The good news is that most of the obstacles or catastrophes that delay or derail projects are predictable and avoidable. Many project post mortems produce lists of "Lessons Learned" that are identical to the lessons learned in the last project. If we're going to learn the same damn thing every time we might as well call them "Lessons NOT Learned." There's not a whole lot of learning going on when the #1 reason why teams fail to achieve their goals is that they don't have clear goals, and the #2 reason why projects fail is that communication sucks (or, in more politically correct form, is less than sub-optimal)¹.

Behold the Scrappy Project Manager. Scrappy Project Managers don't settle for hysterics and management by crisis, and they certainly don't let something as mundane as so-called reality limit them. They either find a way to seize success from the snapping jaws of defeat, or they invent one. This book is a collection of wisdom on how to get results when the odds are against you, when precedence says it can't be

1. Ref: The Bull Survey (1998), The KPMG Canada Survey (1997), The Chaos Report (1995), The OASIG Study (1995).

done, and when the majority of humans believe your project is impossible. It's a book for people who aren't bound by convention, assumptions, or self-limiting beliefs. It's for people who can be counted on to get the job done through hard work, creative thinking, basic common sense, and sheer persistence.

SCRAPPY PROJECT MANAGEMENT is the real deal. It cuts through the BS right to the bone. Structured around the dirty dozen of worst project practices, the 12 predictable and avoidable pitfalls that every project faces, this book describes what REALLY happens in the project environment, and how to survive and thrive in the maelstrom. The converse of the dirty dozen are 12 common sense practices for project management that have been proven to enable leaders to steer their teams clear of avoidable disaster and as much as double their chances of project success.

SCRAPPY PROJECT MANAGEMENT is for those who have the stamina to do what needs to be done in their businesses, and the resolve to go the distance.

The role of project leader is not for the faint of heart. As in many worthy causes, tact and diplomacy can only get you so far, so be sure to have some spunk and attitude on hand when you run out of road with the gentler approach. Sometimes an outrageous act of bravado and nerves of steel will serve you far better than any fancy-schmancy Microsoft® Project Gantt chart. It is during these defining moments that you'll come to appreciate and benefit from the scrappy approach to leading a project. Let's all chant together the scrappy words of Will Willis: "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space." Enjoy the ride!

1

Customer? What Customer?

Be completely & unrepentantly obsessed with the “customer.”

“There is only one boss: The Customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.” – Sam Walton

I haven't quite put my finger on it, but there is something about the human condition that retards our ability to be successful project managers. Maybe it's genetic. When we see someone else fail, it's easy to assume that they're just stupid; but when we fail, it's simply an honest mistake or sheer bad luck. “They” should have seen it coming, but “we” were understandably taken by surprise, an innocent victim of circumstances outside our control.

I think psychologists call it the fundamental attribution error, but to me it's the biggest barrier to avoiding predictable pitfalls in a project. It's relatively easy to see where someone else's project is about to hit the skids or could have avoided the long, slow slide into project hell, yet

somehow we are still blissfully unaware as our own projects creep inexorably toward Dante's Inferno.

Consider a couple of well-publicized project failures from the 1970s. The first is from a March 15, 1972 article in the *San Jose Mercury News*.

The Moose is Not Loose. Scientists tracking the migratory behavior of moose asked some engineers to design and build a satellite receiver/transmitter for them. When it was ready, the researchers fitted it into a collar that would fit around a moose's neck. They stealthily crept out of their camouflaged den, tranquilized and tagged the object of their scientific desires, then scurried back to their observation post. They patiently waited and watched, but the blip on the radar screen showed no movement. Moose were known to be highly territorial, but the researchers were still a bit surprised at how very small their territory seemed to be. They finally went to check on their reclusive hoofed mammal, only to find him dead in the very same spot where they first attached the tracking collar.

Cause of death? The transmitter weighed so much that the animal was unable to stand while wearing it. Aghast, the scientists went to the engineers, exclaiming, "You killed our moose!" to which the engineers replied, "What moose?" They were oblivious to the fact that their product was going on a moose's neck. Yes, this really happened.

We had a Whale of a Time. This was a bad week for mammals. An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that same week described similar misadventures with a whale that wandered into the San Francisco Bay. With much media hoopla, different—but no less ill-fated—scientists laid their plans to track the whale. This giant oceanic creature, affectionately named Humphrey, was escorted from the Bay and encouraged to resume his sub-oceanic travels. Cameras clicked and reporters vied for position on the dock as a tracking device was affixed to the whale's back. The crowd cheered as Humphrey submerged... and immediately disappeared from the radar screen. The transmitter wasn't waterproof!

The indignant scientists accosted the hapless engineers and proclaimed, “You lost our whale!” to which, of course, the engineers retorted, “What whale?” Sorry to say, I am not making this stuff up!

This kind of incredible “oops” in projects isn’t limited to mammals or to the last century. In January 2004, *Der Spiegel* chronicled the mishaps of German and Swiss engineers connecting their respective parts of the new Upper Rhine Bridge, who discovered that one half had been built 54 centimeters lower than the other. (That’s over 21 inches for those of you in the three countries that still have not converted to the metric system: Liberia, Myanmar, and the US.) Reconstruction costs were massive.

You see how these things go. The most astonishing things can and do happen. What are we supposed to think about a project team that fails to mention that the product they want their engineers to design is going on a hoofed mammal with a pendulous muzzle and enormous antlers? Or one that fails to mention that the product will be riding the back of a sodden vertebrate, destined to go far below the H₂O? Or a team that didn’t bother to specify the height at which their bridge will meet up? Assumption is the mother of all such project management calamities. Assume nothing! We’ve all heard it: “when you assume you make an ‘ass’ out of ‘u’ and ‘me’.” But it’s a slippery slope, and projects are awfully busy, so, gee, I guess I can understand why keeping the end result and the delight of the customer clearly in mind gets shunted to the back burner. Gimme a break. I truly would have loved to hear the excuses offered at these post-mortems.

The obvious question for me is how many project teams are creating products and services in the absence of what’s going to delight their customers? Smarter people than me have made these mistakes, so I am highly attuned to keeping the customer’s desires top of mind in any project where success matters.

Note these statistics. Let me be the first to admit that I am not a marketing genius. In fact, what I know about marketing could be shoved up an ant's ass and still rattle around like a BB in a boxcar. But consider this: more than 50% of all new products fail to meet their goals because they don't meet the needs of their target customers and because they are released with unacceptable quality issues. Even when the quality is acceptable, between 60% and 90% of all new products fail to meet customer expectations.²

Do the math. The world is full of gizmos and gadgets that people don't want, don't need, and certainly don't want to pay for. Buoyed by hopelessly optimistic marketing revenue projections that are achieved less than one time out of 600, they get to market before anyone finds out just how off the mark they are.³ Clunky user interfaces, products that fail to perform as promised, or annoying bugs in the released product create doubt as to whether the designer ever thought about the end user, ever used the product themselves, or, gawd forbid, had talked with even a single real customer. All too often the response is ... Customer? What customer? Oh, shoot, we were so darn busy that we forgot about the friggin' customer!

Who is your Customer? Every team member has an image of the customer in their head, and typically, that customer looks and acts just like they do. However, this image may in no way resemble a real customer. In actuality, many people working on projects have little or no experience of their customers. Their information is secondhand, gathered by sales, filtered by marketing, and interpreted by the project manager and designers. I once worked with a team of people who'd been designing complicated chemical analysis equipment for decades. Several of the lead designers had never operated the instrument. In as little as an hour or a day they could have easily acquired some real insight into what it was like to use one of their instruments, but it simply wasn't a priority. Needless to say, I required them to learn to use the products when I was leading the project. Maybe I'm kidding myself, but I think they actually enjoyed their work more knowing personally how real people in the real world used their product.

2. Aberdeen Group, "Making the Case for Collaborative Product Commerce," July 2001.

3. Hammer and Company, "Accelerating Innovation: New Urgency, New Approaches." 2003

Sometimes the customer of a project is an internal person in the same company, sometimes they are an outside person who buys or uses the product or service. In any case, knowing who will be the ultimate judge of success or failure is critical to defining success. Some people are oblivious to the fact that there is a living, breathing customer out there whose needs and wants should be the driving force in the project. Or they assume that the customer is just like their very own self, and create something they think the customer will be happy with. Save us from these kinds of products! That's how Microsoft Windows® was created.

SCRAPPY TIP: *The first characteristic of a successful project manager is to be completely and unrepentantly obsessed with the customer. Get out of your office, visit delighted and dissatisfied customers, ride on sales calls, call angry customers who have abandoned your products for other solutions, interview your family, friends, and strangers on the street. Shadow real customers throughout a day or a week. Swim in the customer's fishbowl so that you know exactly what their pain is and how your product or service is the painkiller that will surprise and delight them.*

Ignore the Voice of the Customer at Your Peril. Of course, no amount of customer-centric thinking will save a team led by someone who doesn't value customer input. A high-level manager at a Fortune 500 company once declared to me, "Our customers should be required to take an intelligence test prior to purchasing the product." While some customers aren't the sharpest knives in the drawer, I believe that truly customer-focused designers can make any product easy to learn and use. Besides, stupid people have money too!

While the key to delighting customers has always been to under-promise and over-deliver, just asking customers what they want is not enough. Henry Ford said that if he'd listened to customers, Ford Motor Company would have been designing faster horses. Customers rarely have the imagination to ask for things totally outside of their experience, like overnight package delivery or fax machines, until after they are invented. But customers can be terrific sources of information about what causes them headaches, what they worry about, and the seemingly impossible challenges that they face. "What seems

impossible, but if it were possible, would transform your business for the better?" Ask that simple paradigm-shifting question and you may find the seeds of a billion dollar business.

There is no substitute for personal experience with the customer. As Steve Blank of the Aberdeen Group says in *Making the Case for Collaborative Product Commerce* (July 2001), "There are no answers inside of this building. Getting project teams out swimming in the customer fishbowl is critical to enabling each person on the team to make decisions in alignment with real customer problems, wants, and needs." Cultural anthropology is studying what it's like to be immersed in the customer's world, and I believe that it's the best way to find out what real customers want and need. Ignoring the voice of the customer significantly raises the odds that your product will be in the huge heap of new products that fail to meet customer expectations.

SCRAPPY TIP: *Most teams don't take the time to include the customer until it is far too late. Too busy to develop a thorough understanding of the very people who will judge their project's success, they stumble onward, mistaking activity for progress. Those that do invest in understanding of their target market gain a significant advantage, more than doubling their chances of creating a result that will surprise and delight their customer. Don't settle for "no time to include the voice of the customer" in your projects!*

About the Author



Kimberly Wiefling is the founder of Wiefling Consulting, LLC, a scrappy global consulting enterprise committed to enabling her clients to achieve highly unlikely or darn near impossible results predictably and repeatedly. Her company has helped individuals, teams, and organizations realize their dreams through a combination of courageous leadership, project management excellence, sheer determination, and plain old stubbornness. She has worked with companies of all sizes, including one-person ventures and those in the Fortune 50, and she has helped to launch and grow more than half a dozen startups, a few of which are reaping excellent profits at this very moment.

Kimberly attributes her scrappiness to being raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and to the sheer luck of genetics—her whole family is seriously scrappy. (Thanks, Mom and Dad!) A physicist by education, she earned a Master’s degree in Physics from Case Institute and a Bachelor’s in Chemistry and Physics from Wright State University. Kimberly spent a decade at HP in engineering leadership, product development, and project management roles. She then spent four years in the wild and crazy world of Silicon Valley start-ups before leading one to a glorious defeat during the dotcom bust of 2001 as the VP of Program Management. (Indeed, the company was purchased by Google, but as luck would have it, for pennies on the dollar... Drat!) Vigorously scrappy, she reemerged from the smoldering remains of the “Silicon Valley Mood Disorder” to launch her own company, consulting worldwide from Tokyo to Armenia, as well as the once-again-vibrant Silicon Valley.

Kimberly is the executive editor of The Scrappy Guides™, and a regular contributor to Project-Connections.com. She is also the lead blogger on the UC Santa Cruz Extension’s The Art of Project Management Blog.¹⁵ Feel free to contact her in person at kimberly@wiefling.com.

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