Effective International Project Management

Deliver!

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To Erik and Jonatan

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Introduction

The Fantastic Feeling of Delivery

Wow! You made it!

The project just closed with delivery on time, or at least with an acceptable minor delay. You are exhausted and exhilarated and you just want to kiss your team mates and the world.

What looked like impossible a few months ago has been achieved by the team, rising to the challenge and working together like never before. The dispute about the seating arrangement was forgotten. The irritation between the senior guy and the new lady was set aside. The previously stiff control freak from quality assurance has loosened up and has given great suggestions to the team where to focus to ensure the critical elements and maybe review the less important aspects later.

How did this happen?

Maybe a better question: How did the team manoeuvre around all the unexpected problems that appeared on the road?

Many books on project management present a recipe to follow and claim that everything will be fine. In my experience projects are really hard and there are plenty of examples of high-profile projects that fail to deliver and use much more resources than planned. Especially governmental/public IT projects have a reputation for failing to deliver, even though they use expensive project management consultants to guide them.

In this book, you get unique insights into the many problems that occur in real project and tips on how to avoid them.

Project Pitfalls

There are powerful, invisible forces in play that work against every project. Project team members change jobs or lose interest. Reorganizations shuffle stakeholders around. You get dragged into other activities. Political interests shift and the project budget is reduced or eliminated. From all sides, your project is constantly under attack.

This is the dark side of working in (large) organizations and not often openly discussed. You only hear the complaints around the water cooler and over lunch. Cynical remarks about top managers' decision making or policy whims. Some people turn bitter when their favourite projects are neglected after years of dedicated toil. Still, it is you, the project leader, who have to defend the lack of delivery in your next performance review.

I do not believe that there is an intentional sabotage on the part of the line management, it is just a systemic disadvantage that projects have to handle. Resource management and allocated budgets are typically part of the line organization and projects therefore implicitly get second priority.

Therefore, to enjoy project management it is important that you are aware of the uphill struggle to the finishing line. The more you know about potential pitfalls, the more agile you can act. The sooner you identify possible problems, the more optionality you have to eliminate or avoid them. If you are the first person to identify a certain risk, you can manage expectations or modify the scope and lead your project to a complete conclusion. The real-life examples in this book illustrate typical project problems and this can help you to identify issues in your own projects as early as possible.

When you run your next project, you will be better prepared when the pitfalls show up on the horizon and you can realign your project and deliver.

Your Value Base

All your judgements and considerations are based on your own value base. The better you know your values and life priorities, the better you can align the project to be an expression of you into the world. This may sound a bit vague or soft, but we will come back to this in a more explicit form later in the book.

The better you know the values of yourself and your team members, the better your communication will be.

Communication is often seen as the most critical part of working together, so everything you can do to improve alignment and understanding is well spent time and money.

Reader's Guide

This book is for everyone who wants to be more effective in projects. Especially for you who take the role as project leader, but also for project team members it is useful to have a deeper understanding of the dynamics in projects to enhance your contribution and have more enjoyable work.

The book is organized in five sections. First there is an introduction to define and clarify the concepts and words used in the rest of the book. (What is a project?) Then we come to the four core sections of the book which reflect the four main aspects of any project: The Delivery, The Team, The Matrix and The Project Manager.

We start with the end in mind [^CoveySevenHabits]. Therefore we start to look at the **the Delivery**. We look at critical factors to ensure customer acceptance and how to converge to a closure. The main takeaway is the value of clear, indisputable targets based on what the customer values. These targets are useful at the outset and indispensable at the end. You have to know what **done** looks like.

The next section is about **the Team**, the engine of your project and your main concern. Your people make it happen and are your most valuable resource. (This sounds cliché, but it is really true. Alone you can do almost nothing.) Most of your attention during the course of the project will be on your team. This is an additional challenge for international projects when your team is spread across several nationalities and locations.

We then zoom out to **the Matrix**, the organizational force field in which you operate. Being project leader gives you much freedom to influence, even though your formal authority is minimal. Therefore, the methods of indirect power allow you to build momentum to push your project over hurdles that may arise. The mix of managers and reporting lines often delay decisions and cloud clarity, so your consistent, convincing communication clears this fog and frees your team from frustrations.

Finally, we look at you, the **Project Leader**. Where do your values and personality come to full bloom? When do your eyes glisten from enthusiasm? This chapter gives you tools to search for your grounding and to get going in a direction that matters to you.

Example Stories

Each chapter is dotted with real life stories from international projects that illustrate the material. Two interesting cases that come back again and again are projects I managed. The first one is a successful project to build up a product development department in Shanghai, China for a multinational company. This project is referred to as "Shanghai Project". The second one is a technology development project called "Project Eagle" that delivered an expensive sensor system that nobody needed. They illustrate well many of the pitfalls that you can encounter. Some other projects are also used to illustrate other challenges.

In addition to my own experiences, I have also included tips from selected world class project managers from different industries and different countries. Each chapter is concluded with an **insight section** where these seasoned experts share their best advice.

The stories and examples are included to help you to identify problematic situations even before they arise in your projects. The intention is to make you quicker to react so that you have more time to develop constructive solutions.

Privacy and Names

Throughout the book, there are numerous stories from real-life projects. Most of them are from my experience in international projects during the last 20+ years. I would like to thank all the interesting people I have had the privilege to work with over the years. To respect your privacy I have chosen to change the names of the people in these stories.

In the contributions from the international experts, some sensitive company details have also been changed to protect competitive advantage.

Additional Material

Additional material and discussion about international project management is found at the companion website: www.deliver-book.com

Please join the discussion and share your stories from your projects. We can learn a lot from each others' experiences, success stories and disasters.

This book is a dynamic production on LeanPub.com and the book will improve over time - every time feedback is given. Please send me suggestions if something is unclear or if I should improve the

presentation of some aspects. Maybe you have an experience that would be interesting to share in the next edition of the book?

Send me a mail on: **goran@deliver-book.com**

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Good luck!

The Delivery

Done!

Finished! Done!

That is what we want to be, feel and experience. The sensation can be a fantastic elation. The receiver has got what he asked for, based on updated re-aligned expectations and fine tuning. You close down the project folder one last time and realize: This is it! You call your team members one last time to share a short moment of gratitude together and you are ready for the next challenge. This book is written to help you experience delivery more often and more consistently.

Project Shanghai: Delivery

After three years of hard work, the product development department was operational.

The first new products were in production and had sold for more than a million RMB. All systems for design, validation and life cycle management were in place. The organizational responsibilities and interfaces were in place. The engineers were operating with enough expertise and experience to leverage the international resources of the multinational company to solve our customers problems.

There were of course many other things to work on and to improve to really reach world-class level. It takes years or decades to build up the expertise needed to lead into the future. Therefore organizational projects can continue forever.

So, how did we come to the conclusion that the implemen-

tation project was finished? How could I as project manager claim delivery?

The clue here was to define the goal with criteria that got more specific over time. When the project started, the criteria were very loosely defined, completely insufficient for a clear delivery in a reasonable time. Therefore, I took the lead in sketching a ten year scenario, where the "implementation phase" would be completed after almost three years. During the first two years, I worked with the steering group to refine the criteria for completion.

The pitfall here is to keep the closure criteria too vague, since it is uncomfortable to commit to something that you are not sure that you can deliver. It takes courage to write down the words of a goal that is challenging. (or "big, hairy and audacious" as Jim Collins would have it[^CollinsGoodToGreat]). The problem is that you cannot really claim success when the target is fuzzy.

I have observed that it depends a lot on the company culture if people dare to write a plan or not. (How severely are failures are punished?) We will come back to this in the chapter about **the Team**.

If you goals are unspecific - how do you know that you are finished?

... or not done?

Unfortunately, quite often projects do not finish like this. They go on and on and deliver less and less value and slowly peter out and die. People are pulled away to other activities. Team members change jobs. Other activities get higher priority. You are alone, bearing the headache of a zoombie project. That is a nightmare for you as a project leader, since it can haunt you for years.

Therefore your first duty as a project leader is to actually finish projects. Deliver and close. If there are new needs coming up it is often better to close the old project and start a new one. This is harder than it sounds, since there are many forces that work against you.

There will be people who want to include more and more in your project. There are political fights that change priorities. Resources are scarce, and other projects can be more successful in getting funding. Your boss asks you to do other things "in parallel"...

The Project that Never Ended

A common infliction of large organizations are project-zoombies. Those creatures loom at the bottom of the priority list but exude a deadly breath of bad conscience and low level stress. These projects were started with enthousiasm and energy at some point in the past. Often with the best intentions. However, today they are a block on your feet and lure away energy and gumption.

One interesting never-ending-project I was part of started with a quite specific customer problem of noise in a special kind of electric motor. During the years, various solutions were attempted, sometimes driven by a technical insight, sometimes just to show the customer that we were working on it. The intention was then "to keep the customer happy", even if we were pretty sure that it would not solve the issue.

One important ingredient in this specific project was that the project team was distributed across four locations in Europe and Asia, with project members belonging to different departments in a multinational corporation. Nobody had this activity as his/her highest priority. A face-to-face meeting with the project team would lead to a frenzy of emails and actions, but in the subsequent months the activities would get lower and lower priority and slowly cease. This slack period would be ended by a long and angry mail from the project

leader, which would create some bad feelings and some half-hearted actions. We all started to dread the mails and secretly stopped reading after the first page.

One key feature of the project was that it was open-ended. We did not really know what **done** looked like. What was included? What was excluded? There was also no explicit budget for the project. The project manager had got some higher management to state that is was of "strategic importance", so nobody was following up costs and time. In a certain sense, this project was parasiting all other planned activities. In a well-disciplined organization, this would not happen - but in most organizations it does. After years of struggle, we killed this activity and reshaped it to a real project and got real results.

Was it a complete waste of time and money?

I do not think so. We learned many things and solved lots of minor issues for the customer.

However the right question is: Do I think it was a good use of the time and money?

To this, my answer is clearly no. We lost a lot of energy and time due to miscommunication and anger and frustration. Being part of a team like this for a few years eats into your soul and ensures a latent low stress level.

Only when everybody knows clearly what **done** looks like, focus can be maintained and the project can be closed.

In this book we will look at many of the challenges that you could encounter in your projects, to increase your odds to deliver.

Delivery Package

The delivery is something you live with for months and in your head it is crystal clear what is included. However, for your receiver and other stakeholders who are only partially involved it is often less clear. Therefore you have a didactic task at delivery to explain to the stakeholders what they get and that it meets the agreed requirements.

Therefore it is useful to make a whole package of the delivery:

- The project product - the final deliverable
- Closure presentation - explanation that you deliver what you agreed
- Decision meeting material - to make the hand-over/closure meeting more formal

A face-to-face closure meeting is really good use of everyone's time. Give a short presentation that explains what you deliver. Hand over the final product. Shake hands.
If you can bring in some of your project team members and other stakeholders to this meeting, you can share the feeling of completeness and achievement to all of them. Even though they are not "needed" in the meeting, it can be rewarding for them to see the receiver officially expressing the value of their work.

There is a psychological mechanism connected to the sense of touch, that when you hold something physically, you are more prone to accept it. (This trick is often used in street-side shops and bazaars, where the salesman will give you something that you hold in your hands while trying to sell it to you.) Thus, if you can, make your delivery package into a physical format, even if it is a digital delivery. A nice box with a USB-stick is more physical and definite than an email. It gives a stronger sense of closure and finality. It is often worth it to spend some money on the finishing quality of

the materials. If you ship a document, you can make a print out on high-quality paper. If you send a DVD, get a nice label printed or custom label.

Customer perception of quality is not only the "measureable product quality". Especially engineers focus so much on the content that they think that the product itself is strong enough to convince the receiver of the delivered quality. However, the packaging is really important for the total perception, and is something that the receiver experiences first-hand [^HsiehDeliveringHappiness].

Official Style as Quality Indicator

Four years hard work was coming to an end. The PhD research had led to two successful publications in top journals and one more was in the pipeline. An open-source introduction to the research field was published and used in a number of labs. We had built a new type of robot and established a laboratory.

From the content point of view, I was quite happy, but I did not know how to package it. One aspect was the physical appearance of the PhD Thesis book. At Delft University, the author has full freedom in designing the cover. Often a photo or an illustration would cover the front. Each book looks different. Everyone used paperback printing at the local printshop.

Except for my supervisor Richard. He chose to print his thesis with black linen hardcover. It feels completely different in the hand. The books looks like a standard reference in the field. It almost tells you immediately that it is a work of quality. Nobody would doubt that he was serious about the value of his contribution.

I took his lead and did something different as well. Since we were short on cash in those days, I had to find another solution, since the hardback printing was out of my reach. The solution was to create a cover design that mimicked the

official university visual identity, with the right logotype and the right colors. It looks like a prototypical Delft University Publication, even though it was the only one. In that sense, it lends credibility from this institution and looks professional even before the reader starts looking inside. Not as good as the black linen hardback, but good enough this time.

How can you make your delivery package radiate quality and professionality, so that people are already half-convinced before they get to the content?

What's in the delivery? Was this what we agreed on?

One real risk at delivery is that the receiver is disappointed. He/she will not remember exactly what you agreed upon, and there is a psychological mechanism that leads us to mis-remember in our advantage. It is a form of confirmation bias[^WikipediaConfirmationBias] that makes all of us remember more than was agreed. It is the task of the project manager to actively manage the expectations of the receiver and other stake holders so that they have a clear picture of what they will get when delivery day comes.

When you start up a new project, one of the first task is to define the scope and what is included/excluded, to define the delivery. There is often a fuzzy picture with a few words describing the general direction, but this is not enough. The more vague description of the project, the higher the risk for scope creep and added requirements during the run, which will make your job more difficult. A good test for clarity is to explain your project to a friend who is not involved. If you can explain in a minute what will come out of the project, you are clear enough. (However, as we discussed in the previous chapter

in the section about project types, some projects operate with a lot of uncertainty, so the details of the final product may not be known when you start. However, which customer value you bring must be clear.)

You make sure that the whole team knows what **finished looks like** and focus on how this will bring value to your customers. Only when you have a clear scoping, you can consistently communicate which output you will create and what the end-effects are.

Build agreement with your stakeholders on the scope during the project. Often you need to modify and refine the scope halfway through the project when you know more, but that is no excuse for having no agreement in the beginning.

Scoping is hard, since there are lot's of unknowns at the start of a new project, and it is tempting to be vague. It is sometimes also tempting to over-promise, certainly when this is encouraged by the implicit organization culture.

Fabulous Scoping to get Funding

One implicit problem in some organizations is the decision making process for starting new projects. If the project leader promises a lot, that project can get funded and start up early. Therefore, there is a sub-conscious force that stimulates over-promising with a large scope and huge returns, just to get started. Those who propose realistic projects don't get funding to start.

At a research department where I worked on "Project Eagle", one of the senior team members consistently over-promised at the start-up of projects. This ensured that his pet projects always were well funded. This researcher, Ben, also had the surprising skill to discover a new, unexpected technical problem in the middle of each project, which made it impossible to deliver the original plan. Most of the stakeholders were impressed with his way of communicating this semi-disaster,

and how he nevertheless could deliver some value at the end of the project.

This strategy was successful for over more than a decade and I think one of the key elements was the volatility of management at that location. During ten years, the department had five managers, so no boss was around long enough to call the bluff. On the other hand, many colleagues were there for a long time, seeing Ben perform the same game over and over again…

Once, this behaviour blocked resources for me and the "Project Eagle", and I had to use considerable goodwill and creativity to make that project progress. It was a stressful dilemma at that time - should I prioritize my loyalty to my colleague Sven and the harmony of the department or should I put my project first and escalate to the local management?

At other places I have worked, people have been demoted or fired if they consistently over-promise and under-deliver.

Is over-promising rewarded in your organization?

What is your strategy to (make it look like you) under-promise and over-deliver?

A useful method to come to a detailed scoping is to sit down with the customer or the receiver of the project and make a prioritized list of the requirements. Write down the priorities as a ranking: what is the most important item, then second most important, etc. By forcing your receiver to explicitly rank the features he needs, you can spend your efforts where the value is the greatest. It is difficult and uncomfortable to "get out of the building"[^BlankEpiphany] and talk to the receiver, but that will save you lots of stress later.

There are situations where project objectives are not clear. Then the results are destined to be disappointing. Your job is to ensure that you know what finished looks like - or refuse to start. I should have

done that...

250,000 Dollars Project Delivering Nothing

A year before I ran "Project Eagle", I got to run a project to develop a sensor system for a kind of large machine components. As often is the case in technology development organizations, there was a committee that granted research funding, and someone in the relevant committee had allocated resources for this project. Unfortunately, the same person changed jobs just before the calendar year started and the activity should begin.

I did not know what to do. Money was there, 250,000 USD and the timescale was given. 12 months. The only thing missing was the objective.

In the beginning of the year, I was busy with other things, so I sent a mail once in a while to the new committee member, asking for his opinion and suggestions. No useful response. "I will get back to you later.", he said.

Coming into May, I started to get nervous. Would I fail miserably in my first job at this site? I tried to set up some meetings with stakeholders to flesh out the scope of the project. I talked to my department manager who said he would look into the issue.

Many ideas on the table, but nobody wanted to make a decision. I got the recommendation to talk to some other people in another organization. I talked to those as well, but no consensus was found. It went on like this until September, when the department I worked in started to run out of money in the other projects. People started to book hours and expenses on my project and I was desperate. We had spent nine months and 60,000 USD, and there was not even a plan. It did not get better, the problems just accelerated towards the end of the year and by Christmas all the money was consumed. A

quarter of a million dollars gone.

I had achieved nothing.

Not even a report. Not even a project plan. Of course, the money and extra time had helped the other projects to be more successful, but I had nightmares.

The strange and disturbing thing was that it seemed like nobody noticed. Nobody came to me to ask what we had done. Still today, many years later, nobody has ever asked me what we did for all that money. Not even once.

There are many things to learn from this story, among others how poor decision making processes there are in multinational corporations. But more fundamentally, it shows that accountability was missing on many levels and how I failed to use my management to escalate the problem. I was hiding behind our team-leader who was communicating with management. He had no interest in signalling any problems, so nobody noticed the lack of output.

This incident also highlights that it is very easy to measure input to a project, but hard to measure output. It was visible to management what went into the project; manhours booked, external expenses were accounted for at the accuracy of 1.00 dollar. The steady progress in spending masked the complete absence of output.

Exercise: Input or Output?

Do you measure mainly input or output in your organization? What is communicated upwards in the hierarchy? What is the maximum spending that would fly "under the radar" and not be detected in your workplace? (Please note, this is not about fraud or stealing or anything like that. Only about how much money can you spend on something that is utterly useless and nobody notices?)

What can you do to shift focus towards **output**?

False Progress

We all want projects to be successful. We want to pass the gates of the project to feel that we are moving in the right direction. As a project leader, you have vested some of your ego into the project and you want to feel successful. Sometimes a salary bonus is connected to the progress of the project... Your stakeholders wants the project to move forward.

These are powerful forces that nudge you to fudge. The pressure builds up on all of you to be a little bit more positive than reality requires.

You come to a **gate** in the project, which you know that you actually don't meet the requirements for and still you convince each other to "conditionally pass the gate" and continue the project.

The momentary positive feeling of approval and progress quickly melts away when you look at yourself in the mirror. You know that there are problems lurking beneath the surface. This dishonest pressure to pass the gates on time creates an illusion of progress that only delays delivery and invites disaster.

The false progress works against your own goals, so it is important to identify when it is coming. Whenever you get comments like: "It would be a pity to re-schedule the gate meeting." or "It is almost there, and we should move on." you know what it means.

Take the chance to review the scope with your sponsor and consider if the project should be aborted instead of pushed along. Maybe this project is not what your organization really needs right now...

Project Eagle: The missing "why?"

"Project Eagle" was a technology development project that I ran a few years back. From a technical point of view it

had everything. More than twenty different sensor channels measuring different operating parameters inside a complex machine. High-end wireless communication between moving parts and the data acquisition hardware.

However, the reason behind the project was very political.

The company I worked for had come into a power-play battle around responsibility for the functioning of the next model of the machine, and the component and sub-system suppliers were forced to work together to measure the performance of the prototypes. This had never been done before, so we had to develop a new sensor system. The total cost was more than 200,000 euro, and an agreement had been reached on very high management level.

Now it was up to me and my team to make it happen. We got highest priority inside the research center and I was flattered to be trusted to run this "very important project". My needs for attention and confirmation were more than fulfilled.

However, quite soon it started to itch, since I could not get any details on how the data would be used. Why had those parameters been selected? How accurate did we need to measure? Which hypothesis did we want to investigate? What did we expect to find?

The fundamentals had not been addressed, but the project was proceeding at full speed. We had project gates and design reviews, steering group meetings and budget approvals. I proposed twice to stop the project, but our management was adamant - we had to move on! ("Failure is not an option!")

We had again and again "progress" in the project and started to assemble the components into a functioning sensor subsystem.

At the last moment, when it was time for shipment, the political battle between three companies moved to another arena and this project was suddenly no longer relevant. We had hardware worth 200,000 euro on a shelf...

The pitfall to watch out for is the missing **why?**

If you as project leader cannot clearly explain why a certain project should be run, probably nobody can. If you can't, go back to your sponsor to find a good reason why this project is valuable, or abort as early as possible. Don't waste your time and money.

Celebrate

When you have real progress - celebrate!

Bring in the cake. Take the team out for a nice dinner. Bring in some senior executive to get exposure for your team members. Let the world know. Enjoy the attention and spread it to the key players around you who have contributed to your success. Talk about how you are building something of value to your customers, and share the pride of coming closer towards the delivery.

The main reasons for celebration are to create positive memories, to reduce stress, to have a moment to savour the success and feel proud of the achievement, to refill the energy depots. This is important for the sustainability of the team. The most prevalent work-related affliction today is clinical depression in various forms [^CDCDepression]. In a modern work environment, the risk is high to get caught up in negative patterns and celebration is a way to unwind.

As a project leader you can create moments of de-tensioning. Once in a while, when there has been a part-delivery, spend some time together. Enjoy. Laugh together and be grateful for each other's company and contribution.

This also helps to de-fuse conflicts inside the team and helps us to

see each other as humans. Colleagues are not the same as friends, but since we spend so much time together, it helps to get to know each other on a human level. We will get back to celebrations in the next Chapter about the **Team**.

What's left - Sustainable Value

Everything we do is about value and values. When work is good, we create value for our customers and the world. Our work is in line with our personal values. One commonly shared dream is to build a better future, so bring in the value of sustainability into your projects.

Every system you build, every process you establish, every insight you share can continue to create value long after you are gone [^HolmgrenPermaculture]. When you plant a walnut tree it can fruit for generations. As a project leader, you are often at the intersection between the temporary organization of the project which will dissolve after the final delivery and the line organization which will own the output. You have a lot of influence on how robust you want to make the deliverables.

One example is documentation. Documentation is often handed over to the line at the end of a project. How good should the documentation be? There is a hidden conflict of interests at play where the project manager is encouraged to close quickly with as little cost as possible, but the line organization wants a solid documentation package. You are in the squeeze of this dilemma.

In the heat of moment, the interests of the project can dominate, but as soon as the project is finished and the temporary organization dissolved, nobody will really care about the project. On the other hand, the interests of the line organization are still there. They are the ones who live with your output. They will have a lot of time to form an opinion about the quality of your work.

Depending on how you balance the forces, you build your reputation - as a quick scorer or as a solid builder. You also influence your own memories. Do you want to remember that you finished on time or do you want to remember that you created lasting value?