The Lazy Project Manager
By Peter Taylor
(A book review by R. Max Wideman)
The views expressed in this article are strictly those of Max Wideman.
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Introduction

As author Peter Taylor states on the front flysheet of his book: "*The Lazy Project Manager* illustrates how anyone can apply the simple techniques of lazy project management in their own activities and consequently improve work-life balance." Thus, Peter introduces his concept of "productive laziness".

Peter practices from the UK and draws on his project experiences in that part of the world. We suspect that had he been in North America, he would have hastened to register his copyright on "lazy project management" or something similar before some other bright spark copyright's it with a view to making money out of his approach.

Peter's approach centres on three themes:
1. Working smarter
2. The Pareto principle, and
3. The shape of the Brontosaurus

If that doesn't grab your attention, nothing will.

But how can "lazy" tie into "working smarter"? Sounds like an oxymoron to us. First, we have to understand what Peter means by "lazy" and indeed he goes to some length to clarify what he means. As Peter explains it:

> "Lazy does not mean stupid. No, I really mean that we should all adopt a more focused approach to project management and exercise our efforts where it really matters, rather than rushing around like busy, busy bees involving ourselves in unimportant, non-critical activities that others can better address, or which do not need addressing at all in some cases."[1]

Peter calls this "***productive* laziness".[2]

Peter goes on to explain that there is a science behind this laziness and that is the Pareto Principle. As he describes it:

> The Pareto principle (also known as the 80/20 rule) states that for many phenomena, 80% of the consequences stem from 20% of the causes. The idea has a rule of thumb application in many places, but it's also commonly misused. For example, it's a misuse to state that a solution to a problem 'fit's the 80-20 rule' just because it fits 80% of the cases; it must also be implied that this solution requires only 20% of the resources needed to solve all cases."[3]

Peter notes that "laziness" tends to be a negative term, or at least "self-indulgence", while
> "productiveness is seen as a very positive term . . . So, put the benefits of productiveness together with an intelligent application of laziness and you get 'productive laziness'."[4]

Simply put, by working smarter and hence getting the most bang for your buck!

Book Structure

This book is an easy-to-read compendium of author Peter Taylor's project management experiences and resulting wisdom. It focuses on how the project manager can achieve more with less of his or her most important asset – time. The book's content is presented as sound advice illustrated by numerous anecdotes that are not always to the author's credit. The result is a captivating book set out in a series of sections rather than chapters.

These sections[5] are as follows:
1. *Acknowledgements*
2. The science behind the laziness
3. The intelligence of laziness
4. A final definition
5. It's a jungle (book) out there!
6. Can I cheat?
7. The dinosaur theory
8. Thick at one end
9. Much, much thinner in the middle
10. Then thick again at the far end
11. Quick tips to productive lazy heaven
12. Even quicker tips for the really lazy
13. The ultimate question
14. The ultimate answer
15. One final word of caution
16. Looking forward to hearing from you
17. *References*
18. *About the author*

The two largest sections are #'s 8 and 9. By adopting Peter Taylor's *productive laziness* approach at the front end, making it relatively "thicker" (section 8), you should be able to reap the benefits of your groundwork, making the middle "much, much thinner".

That still leaves the back end of the project, which should be thicker (section 10). That is not only to do all the usual "project closure" things, but:
> "Now is the time that you can apply a small amount of effort but gain enormous amounts of knowledge so that future projects are likely to be even more successful and potentially take even less effort."[6]

What we liked
The Brontosaurus model

But what about that Brontosaurus shape mentioned earlier? Its generally recognized shape is shown in Figure 1 and this in turn is likened to the amount of work in carrying out a project – a (little) beginning and end and a (large) bit in the middle. It's the bit in the middle where you, the project manager, should be able to take life more easily.
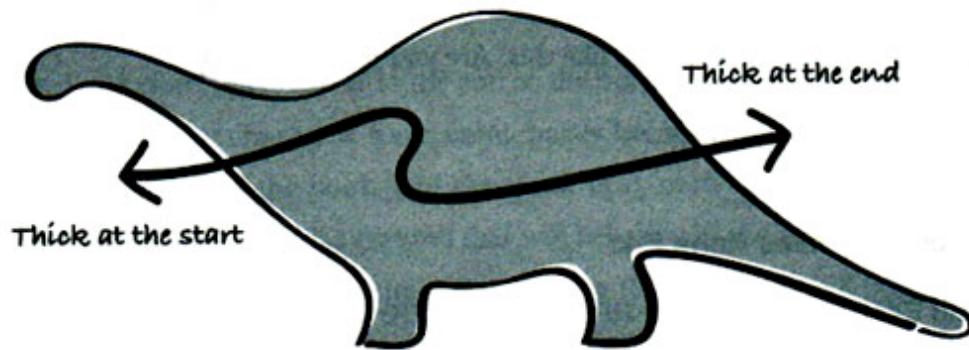
Figure 1: The Brontosaurus profile[7]

As the author describes it:

> "The point here is that working by the productive lazy rule, a smart project manager should apply time and effort at the critical stages of the project, i.e. the start and the finish, and less time in the middle or less critical stage. At this stage there are other people in the project who should be doing most of the hard work, and you probably deserve a bit of a rest anyway."[8]

And what is it that you are so busy doing on the project anyway? Here, Peter reminds us that "70% of your time as a project manager should be spent in some form of communication or other."[9] So, to get ahead, focus on the "front" end (i.e. initiation) and start the way you mean to go on because "Projects don't fail at the end, they fail at the beginning."[10] Three areas to focus on to ensure that your project starts the right way are: Get it going "in the right direction, with the right momentum and with the right processes and controls in place."[11]

That means serious communication and communicating is not that simple. In fact, the whole book is really about communication. As Peter says:

> "lazy project managers will think very, very carefully about what they need to communicate and how they need to communicate it, and why they are communicating what they are communicating . . . [Since] this is by far the biggest activity [it] offers the greatest opportunity for time in the comfy chair. Imagine if you would be able to save some of that 70% of your time, how much more relaxed would you be?"[12]

Peter's tips for achieving this include sections explaining "Confidence does breed success"; "Dress for success"; "Get the upper hand"; "Be prepared"; "Anticipate everything you can"; and "Know the end game".[13] Of course, there will always be crises and Peter advises that the lazy project manager's response must be to "Breath normally"[14]. Peter explains why and how.

Having said all of that, it then comes down to understanding the people with whom you are communicating and this challenge falls right in the fat part of the brontosaurus – err – we mean project.

Understanding people
Communicate as <u>others</u> need <u>you</u> to communicate to <u>them</u>

If you have followed the evolution of the author's thoughts thus far, it will come as no surprise that his advice and tips on how to effectively communicate with people fills the greater part of the book. This

ranges from a simple understanding of how communication works, through communicating in today's modern world of Emails and social media, to emphasizing that "reporting is not communicating". As he says:

> "Putting together fantastically accurate and detailed reports and sending them to anyone and everyone is most definitely not communicating. They won't be read – no one has the time or interest to do this – and they won't be valued and worse, when they do contain project-critical information, they will be ignored. You are wasting your time."[15]

But to understand people, that is to say the stakeholders on your project, especially including your project's sponsor and everyone else involved, you need to categorize them. For this, Peter likes to use several of his 2x2 grids such as the example shown in Figure 2.
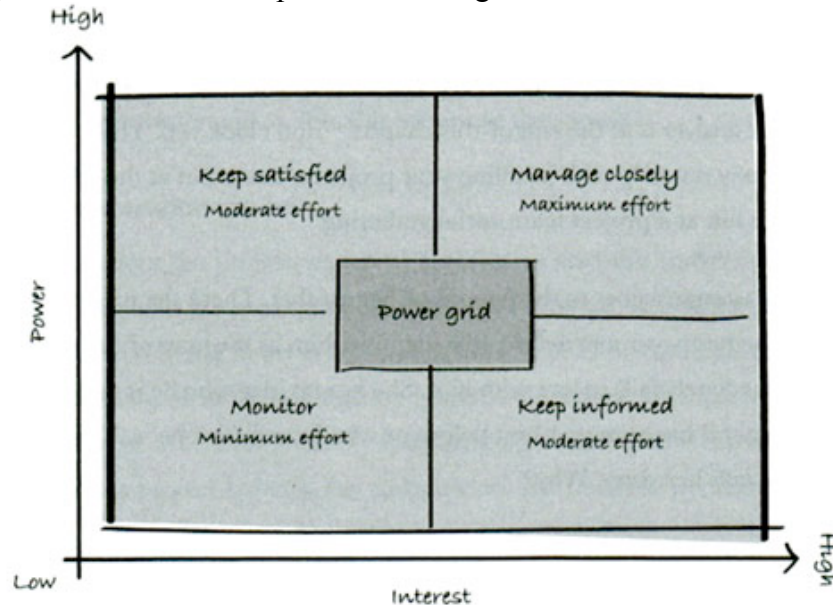

Figure 2: The Power Grid[16]

By categorizing people in this way, you can get an idea of how you should work with them. This is particularly useful in the case of your project sponsor for getting an indication of how much support you are likely to get. For example, if you end up with a project sponsor that is in the 'low interest' and 'low power' quadrant, then you really have a problem.[17]

A particularly tendentious area of "communications" with which almost all project managers will be familiar, but which is rarely dealt with under this heading, is the "project creep". That is the person, or persons, that, for whatever reason, urge changes that individually may be incremental and minor but collectively add up to a serious scope creep and potential project derailment. These people need to be carefully managed and Peter sets out ways and means for doing so.

Downside

We have to admit that we found the title of the book a little off-putting. A "lazy project manager"? Surely this cannot be a serious text? And so it was that this book languished for several months on our bookshelf – probably because we were even too lazy to read the second line on the cover of the book that states: "How to be twice as productive and still leave the office early".

And now we have another confession to make. We've always dreamed of getting our projects so well organized that we can calmly lean back in our office chair and put our feet up on the table and contemplate the world at large. But it never happened. That's because general management likes to see *activity*. I suppose they think that this is the best indication that the company is getting its money's worth, indeed, that's how I thought when I was a part of senior management.

And that is exemplified by what I learned as a member of Her Majesty's army. If you ambled across the parade ground without any apparent destination in mind, you would be quickly hauled up by the military police and closely questioned and scrutinized. However, if you carried some formidable looking document in a brown envelope and marched determinedly across to the other side, you could go anywhere you liked without being apprehended.

Of course, that was in the days before they invented "knowledge workers".

Summary

Throughout, Peter Taylor believes in introducing humor, better yet, project fun should be smart fun. One such example:[18]

> "A man in a hot air balloon was lost. He reduced altitude and spotted a woman below. He descended a little more and shouted 'Excuse me madam, can you help? I promised a friend I would meet him an hour ago, but I don't know where I am'.
>
> The woman replied: 'You are in a hot air balloon hovering approximately thirty feet above alkali desert scrub habitat, 2.7 miles west of Colorado River near one of the remnant populations and spawning grounds of the razorback sucker.'
>
> 'You must be a biologist,' said the balloonist.
>
> 'I am,' replied the woman. 'How did you know?'
>
> 'Well,' answered the balloonist, 'everything you told me is technically correct, but I have no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is that I'm still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help so far.'
>
> The woman responded with 'You must be a project manager.'
>
> 'I am,' answered the balloonist, 'but how did you know?'
>
> 'Well,' said the woman, 'you don't know where you are or where you are going. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise to someone that you have no idea how to keep, and you expect me to solve your problem. The fact is, you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met, but somehow, now it's my fault!' "

Also, amusingly, Peter takes to heart his own recommendations about using the 80/20 rule (explained in section 2) and suggests that the reader may want to apply it to reading the book. That is, read only the 20% that is important and skip the other 80%. Doing so, would take you directly to section 11. But, hey, you would have missed a lot. As Peter explains:

> "You [would have] missed something really interesting about eating dinosaurs, wearing ermine cloaks and how to spot a psychopathic woman at a funeral. We discovered the use for a creep'o'meter, learned much more about Swedish sex in the snow, and why you

should never go ballooning. We avoided a big red bus, learned how to deliver a good Oscar acceptance speech, and appreciated why it is important for your team that you read the newspaper each morning. Oh, and we discovered a little something about mining for gold. We may also have briefly mentioned project management."[19]

But why stop there? Why not apply the same approach to section 11 and arrive at an even more condensed version in section 12? And apply it again and again to arrive at the ultimate (section 14) that consists of only three steps:[20]

1. Buy a copy of the book for each of your team members
2. Get them to read it thoroughly
3. Book Peter as a speaker for the next big team meeting.

So, there you have it.

R. Max Wideman
Fellow, PMI

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[1] Peter Taylor, *The Lazy Project Manager*, Infinite Ideas Limited, Oxford, UK, Introduction, p1

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid, p5

[4] Ibid, p12

[5] We have numbered the sections for ease of reference

[6] *The Lazy Project Manager,* p101

[7] Ibid, illustration on p18

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid, p21

[10] Ibid, p22

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid, p54

[13] Ibid, pp25-29

[14] Ibid, pp75-80

[15] Ibid, p62

[16] Ibid, p38

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid, pp71-72

[19] Ibid, p111

[20] Ibid, p125