Rainbows & Ratholes
Best practices for managing successful projects
By Dhanu M. Kothari
(A book review by R. Max Wideman)

Introduction

Dhanu Kothari is president of D2i Consulting, a project management services delivery company based in Ontario, Canada. He is well known on the project management circuit for his publications and presentations at project management conferences. After twenty-five years or so of project management experience with such companies as HP, Honeywell, Nortel, Scotiabank and the Norwegian Computing Center, he then started his own company. At that point, he obviously felt the need to document and explain how to "translate" theory into practice. As Dhanu says: "[This] book is designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice of Project Management, and to explain how to apply the principles of Project Management for managing successful projects."[1]

Well, Dhanu should know. According to his bio, at various times he has performed as Engagement Manager, Program Manager and Resource Manager, with the companies listed earlier. From that list you can also deduce that Dhanu's experience is largely in the information technology field and influenced by projects dominated by matrix organizational structures and extensive multi-tasking.

According to Dhanu:
> "The book is organized as a series of essays on the 'what and how' of successful Project Management, each one dealing with a specific and practical aspect of the subject. The essays serve as windows into the world of Project Management and present an integrated panoramic view of challenges and best practices."[2]

That is, at least in the view of the author.

The book is well populated with checklists relevant to the topics under discussion and, interestingly, many of those checklists are suited to those responsible for managing portfolios of projects.

Book Structure

Dhanu writes with a subtle sense of humor as the following list of "essay" titles demonstrates. His book contains seventeen such essays and four appendices as follows:

0. Introduction
1. The world of project management
2. Responsibility without authority – the project managers dilemma
3. Where is the ROI? – Management's view of the project
4. Getting the baseline right – the planning process: activity vs. productivity
5. It's out of scope! – The creeping elegance syndrome
6. Who's doing what to whom? – The actors, the script and the story line
7. Getting to the finish line: – The implementation road map
8. If it's not documented, it doesn't exist – The discipline of project operations
9. Who's on first? – Delegating responsibility; getting commitment
10. Uncertainty – the only certainty. Project without risks is a fantasy
11. The cost is the cost is the cost – the mystery of runaway projects
12. Quality is what the client experiences – the product and the process go together

13. People make projects happen – Don't let your team run our of steam
14. It won't happen if you can't communicate – communication skills & tools for survival
15. Manage your soft skills – The how? Goes with the what?
16. Doing the right thing for your project – the professional project manager
17. Finish the job with the right tools! – The project manager's tool kit

Appendices

i. Project Management Maturity – Checklist
ii. List of Diagrams
iii. Bibliography and Chapter References
iv. Recommended Reading

Each chapter concludes with succinct lists of five or six items under the headings:

- Learning Lessons: Avoid the Rathole – Warning Signs, and
- Catch the Pot of Gold – Best Practices

What we liked

As we indicated in the previous section, Dhanu writes in a light-hearted way. Take this for example from Essay #2: Responsibility without authority.

> "How often do you see a project where you have authority over all the factors associated with a project? Consider a simple example of remodeling your kitchen or renovating the basement. You decide on a budget, draw up a plan, select the cupboards, order the material, hire a contractor and sign a contract. Guess what happens next? The delivery of cupboards is delayed, you knock down the drywall and find a gaping hole, and you have to do electrical work that you didn't expect. The project will now take three months instead of the one-month that you planned, you are living out of a makeshift kitchen in the basement, and every one including your spouse and the kids, are talking about this 'Project from hell' ".[3]

Worse than that, Dhanu didn't mention that at the 75% project completion-point the spouse decided to change the whole color scheme . . . !

The first order of business for a new project manager is to understand his or her responsibilities. Dhanu provides a good "fishbone" diagram as shown in Figure 1. Not exactly a cause and effect chart but the layout is familiar. Students of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK) will recognize the eight knowledge areas plus the overall Integration Management. Each fishtail provides a four-point thumbnail of each area and, as such, is definitely limited. Nevertheless, it does provide a quick reminder of the extensive coverage of the project management discipline.
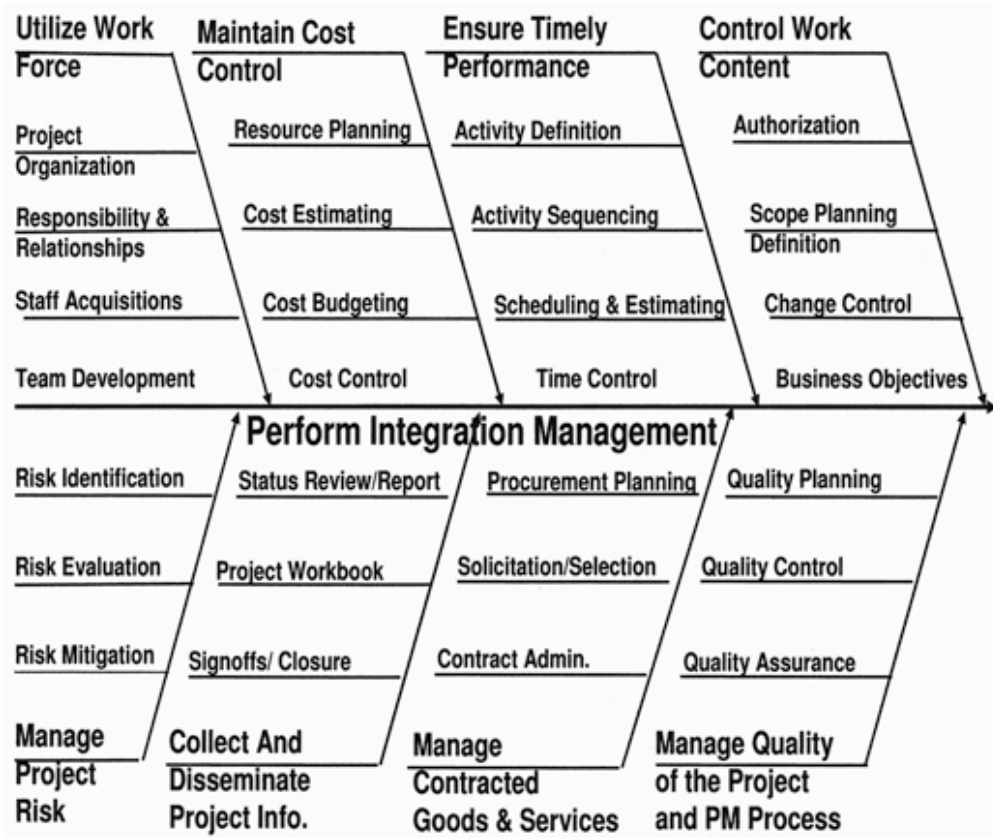
Figure 1: Dhanu's characterization of the project manager's responsibilities[4]

Another valuable lesson is found in Chapter 3 that sheds light on a project from senior management's perspective. This is a discussion not always found in standard books on project management that is well for the project manager to keep in mind. As Dhanu says:[5]

"Management is primarily interested in answers to the following:

1. Why are we doing this project?
2. Who in the organization wants this project to be done?
3. Who is sponsoring the project?
4. Where is the budget coming from?
5. What is the Return on Investment (ROI) for the project?
6. What's the priority for the project?
7. When will it be completed?
8. What are the business risks associated with the project?
9. How will the project help us to meet our business goals?
10. Where is the Business Case including a statement of needs and cost/benefit analysis?"

Of course, a Business Case is more than that, but that's a pretty good list to start with when many projects do not seem to have a Business Case at all! And what if a project is undertaken without senior management backing? Dhanu goes on to state:[6]

"Without management support, commitment and approval:

1. When projects cross departmental boundaries, as is often the case with enterprise-wide projects, they do not have the necessary commitment or 'buy-in' from all the

departments.
2. Departmental managers are unwilling to cooperate, as they do not have the budget allocated for what they see as a corporate project. This is especially true of organizations structured around the Line of Business (LOB) concept
3. The Clients and Departmental Managers do not see value or benefit from the project, or do not trust the [departmental] organization that is delivering the projects
4. There is not discussion of potential risks; or project assumptions are unrealistic or cannot be validated.
5. The organizational and project goals are divergent. Departmental priorities, metrics and performance measurements do not align with project urgency and goals."

The bottom line here is the question: "Who should pay and be responsible?" Not content with highlighting the potential difficulties, of course, when you are confronted with a new project, Dhanu offers six very good steps you should take to improve your chances of completing your project successfully. But you'll have to get the book to find out what they are!

Subsequent essays in the book track through the PMBoK knowledge areas as per Figure 1, and integrate them with the typical project life span. However, that is not immediately evident from the descriptions in the Table of Contents.

In essay #10 on Uncertainty, Dhanu makes an interesting point: "The Project Manager needs to clearly differentiate between Risks, Assumptions, Issues and Changes". He then explains the differences, but warns against turning a risk into an unrealistic assumption. As he says:[7]

"An assumption usually serves as an escape clause, an excuse or a prop for the Project Manager, and it gives the mistaken impression that it will provide some kind of protection in case of non-performance. Firstly, no one reads the assumptions, and secondly, assumptions are seldom contractually binding."

Also in essay #10, Dhanu suggests that one way to identify risks is by grouping them into four categories: Technology; Implementation; Management; and Organizational (TIMO).[8] He goes on to explain the differences between each.

In essay #14 on Communication, Dhanu makes an important point. He says:[9]

"[Communication] is the most important skill for a Project Manager. [It] is the least understood and appreciated aspect of Project Management. And yet, it is the only vehicle at the PM's disposal to drive the project."

He might have added that as a closely related but distinctly separate skill, "Listening" comes a close second. However, in essay #15 on Soft Skills, there is a brief paragraph on "Effective Listening skills".[10] In this same essay, he reminds us of another important and related point: "*the one who controls the minutes, controls the project*"![11]

Downside

There are few things with which we would take issue. We are not quite clear why Dhanu Kothari should have linked "ratholes" to "rainbows" in the title of his book. Other than for the alliteration effect, "Ratholes" (as a single word) is not common but the wiki Wiktionary describes it as:
1. An entrance to a living area or passageway used by mice or rats.

2. A living area used by mice or rats.
3. A particularly squalid human residence.

We think that if our project was that bad, we'd seek a mandate to cancel it and start over – or get out as fast as we could!

Success, as in "a successful project" is not exactly defined in the book, but it is implied by passages such as the following:

> "Project management plays a significant role in the global economy where the success of international co-operation and world-wide trade depends on projects that are delivered on time, within scope and under budget and that ultimately meet the test of customer satisfaction."[12]

While it is true that this is the standard test of sound project management, in today's world we are not sure that this necessarily represents a successful project. The question we are really left with is: Did the product of the project actually provide a benefit to anyone?

Perhaps the essay with which we have the most difficulty is #5 on Scope. This one starts out with the statement:[13]

> "Projects are defined by their attributes – scope, cost, time and quality."

This is a very popular but unhelpful misconception. You may perhaps want to sort a set of projects on one or more of these attributes but that doesn't help the management thereof. The expected, hoped for, or anticipated ***product*** (depending on whom you talk to) is determined by ***scope*** and ***quality***. The consequence of setting scope and quality, plus the quality of the project management, determines the outcome of ***time*** and ***cost***.

In a subsequent paragraph, Dhanu observes:[14]

> "The idea of scoping forces us to differentiate the 'What' from the 'How" of Project Management. It is based on the following principle: Let's define 'What needs to be done' before 'How we are going to do it'."

Here again we would demur. Before you can decide what needs to be done, you must first have a clear idea of what it is that you are going to produce. Then and only then can you really determine exactly what has to be done to produce it.

Later, Dhanu says:[15]

> "The Project Manager's job is to set [a] realistic scope for the project."

Here again we would disagree. We don't think it is the project manager's job to ***set*** the scope of the project. That is the project sponsor's job. It may, however, be the project manager's job to obtain clarification of the project scope – and certainly to establish whether or not producing that scope is feasible within the constraints of time and cost.

The next one is not exactly a criticism but an interesting contradiction. In essay #6 on Stakeholders, Dhanu provides a useful insight into "The Ten Roles of a Project Organization". There he provides a list of the ten key roles, or stakeholders, that are critical in an organization, following that up with a description of the role of each.[16] These are preceded by a Basic Model of a Project Organization, see Figure 2.
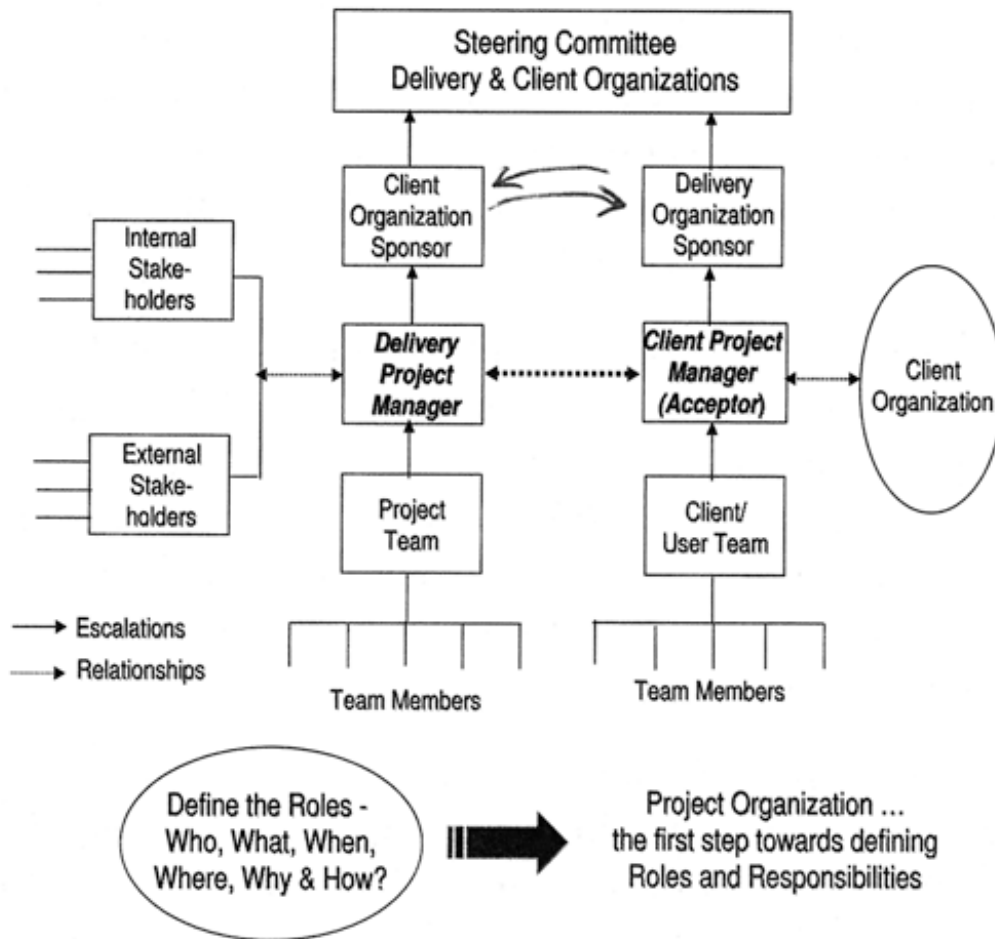
Figure 2: Project organization view – a basic model[17]

Aside from the two boxes that appear to be switched (see our penciled-in arrows), this is an interesting and useful model. However, note in particular, that there are *two* project managers. This is not at all unusual in reality, but it does beg the question: Who is really in charge? This is especially so, when later Dhanu states:[18]

> "The Project Manager role represents the single point of responsibility for the success or failure of the project."

So the questions that remain are: Which Project Manager? In what role? And, for what measure of success? Since the situation that Dhanu illustrates in Figure 2 is indeed quite common, it is clear that the project management industry still has a lot of explaining to do!

Summary

This book is a very handy little publication, packed with good advice – especially for those relatively new to project management and working in information technology related organizations.

The book is available through Dhanu Kothari's web site at http://www.D2i.ca or by sending an Email to info@D21.ca.

R. Max Wideman

Fellow, PMI

[1] By personal letter, 7/5/06
[2] Kothari, D., Rainbows & Ratholes, D2i.ca, 2006, p1.
[3] Ibid, p11
[4] Ibid, Figure 1 on p6
[5] Ibid, p17
[6] Ibid, p18
[7] Ibid, p82
[8] Ibid, p84
[9] Ibid, p119
[10] Ibid, p132
[11] Ibid, p129
[12] Ibid, p1
[13] Ibid, p31
[14] Ibid, p33
[15] Ibid, p34
[16] Ibid, pp42-47
[17] Ibid, p41
[18] Ibid, p44