COLIN D ELLIS

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THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO CONSISTENTLY DELIVERING GREAT PROJECTS

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THE PROJECT BOOK

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The important thing for you to know about me, before you start reading, is that for the past 20 of my 30 years of permanent employment, my entire world was projects. I moved through the ranks from project manager to program manager to PMO manager to heading up large project departments and sponsoring projects. I did this in three countries—the UK, New Zealand and Australia—in both public and private sectors.

I had my fair share of successes and failures and was part of some fantastic teams along the way. I never had any desire to work for myself and yet, after attending a conference in 2015 where I felt like I was hearing the same messages about projects I'd heard 15 years earlier, I decided that someone had to inject a bit of life, energy and honesty into a profession that had stagnated for far too long.

So here we are.

I now speak at conferences and work with forward-thinking organisations around the world to help them evolve their cultures and create a motivated and energised environment where great work flourishes and targets are met.

Liverpool in the UK was home originally. The eldest of three boys, I wasn't particularly good at school. I just wanted

to leave as soon as I could, to earn money to buy records. From the second I started work I loved it. I wanted to be in and around people and be part of something that was consistently new and exciting. So maybe it's surprising it took me 10 years to find my way into the project world.

I emigrated with my family to New Zealand in 2007 and had six great years in Wellington before settling in Melbourne, Australia, which is very definitely home now. When not flying to different parts of the globe or researching how to improve individuals and working cultures, I can often be found at home watching my football team, Everton, play in the English Premier League or hanging with family watching our latest comedy obsession.

I sincerely believe that when done well projects can change the world. I wrote this book because I felt like someone had to provide the real (not theoretical) information on how to do this. I hope you find it useful.

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Colin
Melbourne, 2019

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PREFACE

Projects are the lifeblood of organisations. They are used to fix things that are broken, to add to things we already have or build things we don't, to keep organisations relevant, or simply to improve the bottom line. However you look at it, they are absolutely critical. We talk about them all the time and assume, before we even start, that they'll surely be successful. So a quick reality check before we get cracking: usually they won't be. Here are a few recent statistics:

- On average 34 per cent of projects around the world are considered successful, a rise of only 5 per cent in the past 20 years.

- Of the 84 per cent of organisations that said transformation projects were crucial, only 3 per cent said they had completed any successfully.

- Only one in five organisations say they are effective at scaling agile methods for project delivery, with a further 30 per cent indicating they are only 'slightly effective'.

- Only 34 per cent of organisations deliver projects that are likely to achieve customer satisfaction.

These figures don't make great reading (in fact some of them are plain appalling), but in my experience, they do accurately represent the daily experience in most organisations when it comes to discipline and maturity around the way they deliver projects.

Many reasons get wheeled out in reports on why projects fail, yet in reality there are only two: poor project sponsorship and poor project management. This book addresses both of these problems. It gives project managers the information they need to inspire and motivate their people to do great things, and it provides senior managers with a blueprint for what it means to role model public accountability and decision making.

Consulting organisation The Standish Group, in its 2016 *Chaos Report*, identified the three key success factors for projects as (1) executive sponsorship, (2) emotional maturity and (3) user involvement. In my experience, all play an important part, and all are within the control of the project sponsor and project manager.

Organisations around the world have been throwing money at project management for years now and they still haven't seen a return on this investment. In its 2016 *Pulse of the Profession* report, the Project Management Institute (PMI) noted declines in many of the success factors they track. 'Even more concerning, the percentage of projects meeting their goals—which had been flat for the past four years—took a significant dip.' To check this trend, 'organisations [need] to shift their thinking and embrace project management as a strategic competency for success'.

For me this is a chicken-or-egg problem. When organisations witness great project sponsorship and project management in action they can recognise it as a strategic competency for success. However, only by putting time and money into developing this competency can it produce truly great results.

What's it going to take for senior managers to take projects seriously?

We need to invest in lifting the skill sets of people to help organisations evolve and be better at getting things delivered.

It's time for senior managers to put time, effort and real money into developing a delivery capability that is both fit for purpose and capable of evolving as the organisation grows. A capability that recognises what it means to deliver projects successfully every time. And at the heart of that are project sponsors and managers who do the right things at the right time and in the right way.

Without strong leadership from the top, projects are like cheap Post-it notes. Sure, they'll stick at first, but all too soon they'll come unstuck and be found in the bathroom on someone's shoe.

Organisations know all the reports tell them the same things. There's been no shortage of front-page headlines and even, in a few (rare) cases, public accountability for failure. And reading them it's hard to avoid getting a flash of déjà vu.

A government inquiry into the failed Novopay Education Payroll project in New Zealand found that most of the errors were identical to those revealed in a failed police project (INCIS) 13 years earlier. At the time of writing, the incomplete Crossrail project in London is £500 million over budget and nine months late because of poor risk management. The US Department of Veterans Affairs wasted more than US$1 billion over six years on IT projects alone.

When did it become okay to continually fail and waste money in this way?

The response to such failures, unfortunately, has become all too predictable. Post–year 2000 (Y2K) projects continually ran over budget, because the management of budgets hadn't been a priority for those of us who were project managers at the time when all IT systems around the world needed to be changed. Our focus was to get systems delivered, systems that worked, by 31 December, 1999.

The UK government's response to this budget overspend was to introduce a project management method, PRINCE2. If you're not familiar with PRINCE2, it's a set of principles and processes for capturing information and setting up the structures necessary for projects to be successful. To be honest, it works fine if it's used in the right way … and there's the rub: organisations often don't use these methods in the right way.

'Waterfall' or 'agile' methods (the latter being the latest quick-fix solution many organisations are turning to) are only as good as the people who use them and the teams created to develop the products.

The best projects are made possible by the person who leads them or the environment they create — in short, by leadership and culture. To be consistently successful at delivering projects, this is where you need to start. You then use the methods to create the right approach and capture the information you need to stay on track. In this way a project sponsor and project manager can jointly ensure that projects meet stakeholder expectations around time, cost and scope.

Yet it's easier for organisations to send everyone on a certification course so they can tick a 'We've spent money on improving the way we deliver projects' box than it is to set a new standard for behaviour and to ensure those who don't have the discipline are coached or managed out.

Leadership is not a program, though. It's making a series of choices that demonstrate the courage to do things differently. To challenge the status quo. To invest in people and team building, and to have the discipline to get things done.

The world is full of project managers who collect method badges by demonstrating their 'experience'. And yet, as the statistics show, there are very few leaders who are role modelling what the profession needs in order to build and retain its credibility.

The first section of this book sets out the skills and behaviours project managers need to become project leaders. It's an important distinction. Only through committed leadership can projects be successfully completed in line with stakeholder satisfaction.

The second section sets out what it means for senior managers to do their bit, because simply achieving a particular position in the hierarchy doesn't automatically qualify them to sponsor projects.

Having worked in the project management world for 20 years in a variety of roles, I know what works well and what doesn't, and my aim in this book is to pass this knowledge on to you.

Intent is good. Action is better.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If I'm being honest, I'd say I've tried to write the book I would want to read. Too many business books are dry and boring. Either they're too theoretical to ever be used in your working day or they don't contain a call to action to hold you accountable. They drone on and on, labouring their points yet leaving you confused over what the chapter was all about to begin with.

I've not done that. Instead, I've written lots of short chapters that contain some context, a case study or an activity where I feel they are needed.

The book should be read in its entirety first, before targeting specific actions. You can choose to focus on one topic a week or a month, or you can work collectively as a team or organisation to evolve the way you do things. A number of my clients already do this. You can pick it up at any time and read the whole thing again or simply refer to a chapter where you believe you need more work.

The two most popular methods of delivering projects are *waterfall* and *agile*, and both are covered by this book. Agile is the current darling for delivering projects, but when applied inconsistently or incorrectly it has the same outcomes as waterfall projects delivered in the same way.

Each chapter ends with a set of 'actions'—things to do, read or watch—and if you want to hold yourself publicly accountable, things you can post on social media too. Remember to add the #ProjectBook hashtag and name check me @colindellis and I'll make sure it's retweeted or reposted.

I read a lot of great books while I was writing this one, and you can find a list of those at the back, along with a list of music I was listening to at the time.

If you're a project manager, the first section is where you'll want to start, although the second will give you insights into what to expect from your sponsor. If you're a senior manager looking to improve the way your project or organisation delivers, then you might choose to start with the second section, though in the first I cover what your project managers should be doing to support this evolution.

I hope you'll not only learn from *The Project Book* but find a few laughs here too. If you enjoy it, please provide a recommendation (written or verbal) so others can benefit from it too.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The best projects are made possible by the people who lead them and the environment they create for good people to do great work. These projects are led by project *leaders*, not managers.

Yet for the past 20 years organisations have focused on method implementation as a means of achieving consistent success. Great leadership, we're told by the management books, is the cornerstone of success, so why has this truth been missing from project management for so long? The world is full of qualified project managers with endless certificates and letters after their names, yet time and time again they're letting project stakeholders down.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT HAS TO CHANGE

Organisations simply cannot continue to see more than 60 per cent of what they do fail every year. They should be angry and embarrassed. They should be looking for every way possible to improve on this record, rather than continuing with the same tired old quick-fix approaches they have used for 20 years.

What's worse is that there are no statistics to prove that these old approaches even work, except for those produced by the companies that sell them. I've read many public- and private-sector project management capability reviews, all of which say the same things:

- Projects lack leadership.
- Project managers lack emotional maturity.
- Project sponsors aren't interested enough.
- The cultures that projects exist within aren't conducive to success.

- Organisations are doing too many projects.
- The methods used by project managers aren't used consistently.

When they receive such a report, most organisations will skip over points one to five and head straight to six, insisting on more process to generate greater consistency of delivery.

They're wrong, of course. The only way to get consistently good delivery is to ensure that the people responsible and accountable for project delivery know how to lead and create cultures that others want to be a part of, then have the discipline to get it done.

PROJECTS ARE ABOUT PEOPLE

My view is that there are only two reasons for project failure: poor project management and poor project sponsorship. Every factor that contributes to project failure will come back to one of these root causes.

Part of the problem is that lots of organisations still don't really understand project management, despite having shelves full of textbooks. They think of project management as the triple constraints triangle.

The triple constraints diagram (or iron triangle) depicts the three elements that projects are bound by and that project managers need to be mindful of when planning and delivering projects.
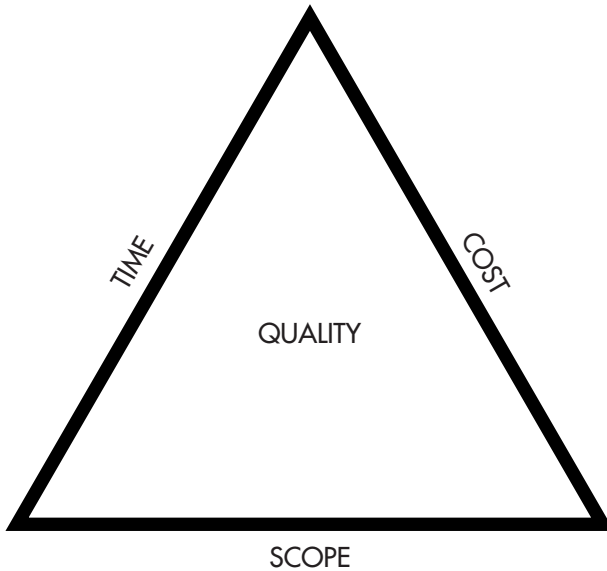
Project managers used to say that two of these elements must remain fixed at any one time, but that was in the days when IT 'dictated' projects. Nowadays if a customer wants to change the scope and has the time and money to do so, then frankly they can do whatever they want and the role of project management is to make it happen.

It's also worth saying here that time, cost and scope are characteristics of a project, not of project management, and project managers should not be measured on these variables.

The next figure illustrates the characteristics of project management, whose job it is to deliver the outputs (not the benefits) required by the customer within the constraints that have been set.
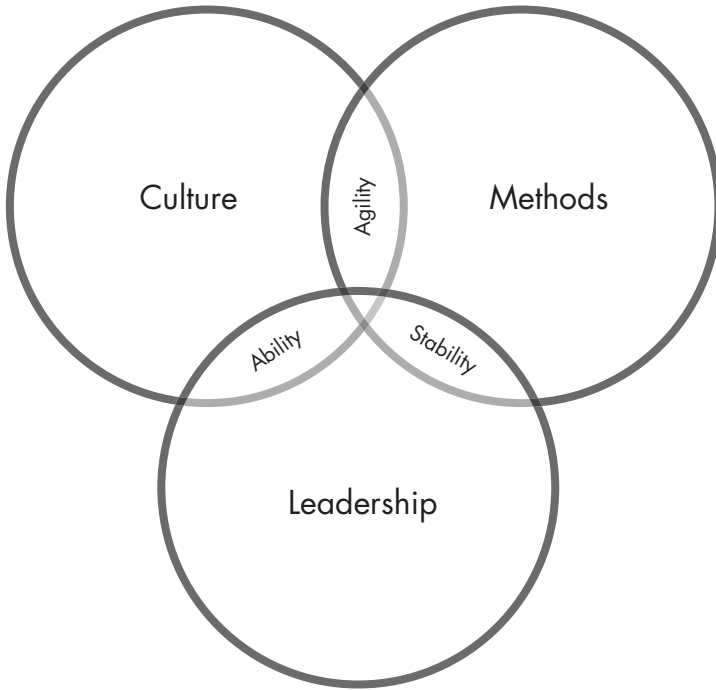
Remember, it's who you are as a person and the environment you create for others to do great work that will make you successful as a project manager.

You need to understand the difference between leadership and management and be able to switch between the two as required throughout the lifecycle of your project. Great leadership provides the foundation for successful project management.

You also need the ability to build and maintain team cultures and be flexible about how you do things in order to

reflect the nature of your project. This is the agility we now yearn for, an agility that existed before the technology boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and that can be used just as easily today, although not on all projects. More on that later.

Finally, there are the methods, the process and techniques that support project managers in building and implementing the plan. Applying these approaches alongside the behaviours expected of leaders will provide the stability and consistency of success that organisations seek from their project management.

Today there are many methodologies and associated techniques that you can draw on, and I have tried not to dwell on these in this book. My emphasis, as you will see, is on ensuring that you understand the leadership and culture aspects of project management, because these are the things you rarely read about and practise, yet they are certainly the most important factors for success.

Remember, the best projects are made possible by the people who lead them and the environment they create for good people to do great work. In comparison to project managers, these project leaders are few and far between. Read this book, then set yourself on a course to becoming one of them. The world needs you.

PART I
LEADERSHIP

There are about a million (really, I've counted them) blogs and articles that articulate what leadership is. Many great business figures and authors have added their own thoughts on this. From the business world, Peter Drucker proposes, 'Leadership is lifting a person's vision to high sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations'. For Ken Blanchard, 'The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority'. Bill Gates predicts, 'As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others'.

'It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front,' wrote the inspirational leader Nelson Mandela, 'especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership'.

My favourite definition of leadership was offered by Maya Angelou: 'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel'. If you aspire to becoming a project leader, this empathetic approach to people will be the foundation for success in everything you do.

To become a leader, you don't need an MBA or PhD or project management qualification or Nobel Prize. Nor do you automatically become one when you have 'manager' or 'director' in your job title. To become a leader you need to make a decision. You need to decide whether you want to serve others and be the kind of person they aspire to be. Or not.

If you don't want to serve others and be a role model, that's totally fine. Being a project leader isn't for everyone; after all, if everyone in the world was a leader, we'd get nothing done!

If you're still determined, then you're on the wrong side of a lot of hard, but ultimately rewarding, work on the journey to becoming a more emotionally intelligent version of yourself, starting with changing the way you behave, talk, listen, laugh, deal with poor performance and innovate. It's possible you'll have to completely reinvent who you are. You'll have to identify and learn about the stuff you're not so great at and spend your weekends cramming, reading books, blogs and magazines, and mapping out new routines to change old habits.

For far too long the corporate world has downplayed the importance of emotional intelligence, dismissing it as one of the 'soft' skills, which are among the hardest things to change.

In his ground-breaking book *Emotional Intelligence*, published in 1995, Daniel Goleman identified emotional intelligence (EQ) as the key differentiator for leaders. 'What makes the difference between stars and others is not their intelligent IQ, but their emotional EQ.'

This is every bit as true today as it was 24 years ago, and it will remain so into the future, not just for us but for our children too.

A 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article predicted, 'Skills like persuasion, social understanding and empathy are going