

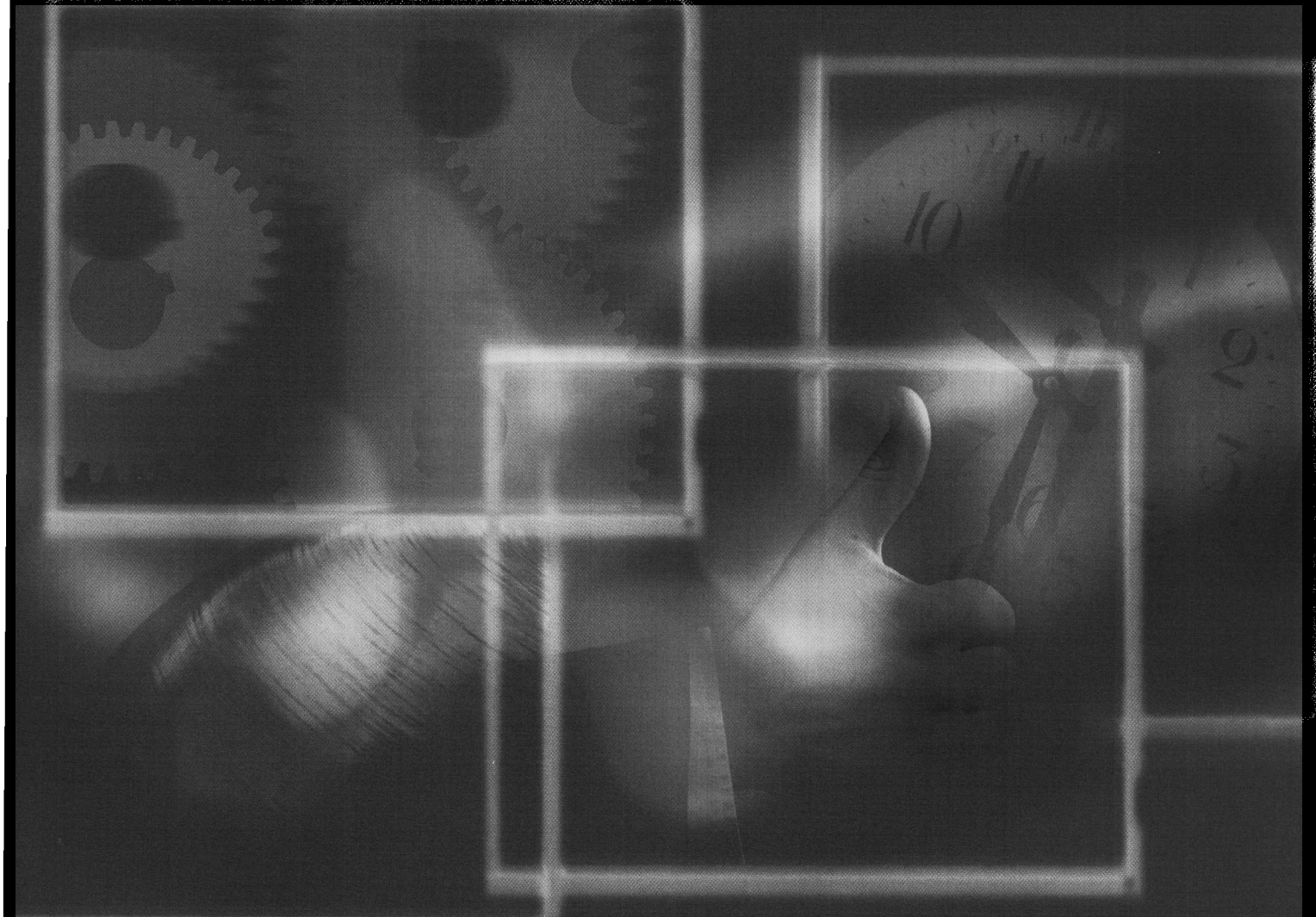
## What is not a project?

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# What Is Not a Project?



by Randy Englund

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# Building the Successful Project

**WHAT IS A PROJECT? NOT MUCH, WAS MY ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION** when asked by a participant in a project management workshop. This person got it—most everything we do, whether launching a space shuttle, developing a new product, introducing a new service, or responding to a request, is a project.

More often than not, a project manager has to influence without authority. (Since you're reading this article, we'll assume you are a project manager, whether or not you have that official title.) It's been said we use only 10 to 20 percent of our mental capacity; I posit that we also use only a small portion of our influence capacity, maybe only 10 percent. If you could double your influence capacity, improving your capabilities by 10 percent, imagine the impact!

More would get accomplished, there would be less stress, partners would cooperate instead of resisting, and work would be more fun. These are a few potential benefits. You can tame the naturally occurring chaos, not by making it go away, but by looking for patterns in human behavior and applying a systematic set of process steps that lead to higher probability of project success. Because you apply this approach to more activities and improve your overall return on investments, you find yourself asking the same question, "What is not a project?"

Let's also assume that you have to communicate with others as part of your livelihood. You may be inundated by questions or requests for status. By understanding how people use the information, such as to make decisions or take a different course of action, you provide the right information at the right time to answer stakeholder questions, thereby facilitating progress instead of impeding it.

So if most of the things you do are projects, doesn't it make sense to learn about project management? But your bosses got the job done when they were at this point in their careers without all this stuff, right? Yes, they often did it by brute force, by the seat of their pants, and by super-human effort of many people over long hours. They didn't know there's a better way.

While project management has been around since construction of the pyramids and buildings such as the Library of Congress, the profession of project management is relatively recent, arising over the last couple decades,

Initiating	Planning	Executing and Controlling	Closing
Conduct a Situation Analysis	Develop the Core Project Team	Monitor Project Progress	Complete Project Documentation
Conduct a Feasibility Study	Identify Project Tasks	Hold Milestone Meetings	Conduct a Project Review
Identify the Involved Departments	Complete Work Breakdown Structure	Refine a Detailed Plan for the Next Milestone	Record and Share Project Experiences
Develop an Evaluation Criteria	Develop a Responsibility Chart	Implement Plan Changes	
Select the Core Team	Develop a Task Network Plan	Complete Regular Project Status Reports	
Write a Requirements Document	Identify Critical Areas (Risk Analysis)		
	Develop a Baseline Project Schedule		
	Identify the Critical Plan		

especially in the 90's. Project management now applies to new product development as well as daily tasks. The Project Management Institute (www.pmi.org) has codified a disciplined body of knowledge. Advanced college degrees and certification in project management are now available, and more sharing happens via newsletters, journals, and conferences. In essence, your boss (or customer) may not have had the benefit of this explicit knowledge and may be expecting you to follow the old story. You now have a new story to follow.

A project is defined as a temporary endeavor to deliver a unique product or service. It can be characterized by:

- Newness of the task
- Detailed specifications
- Division into small steps
- A one time process with specific time limits
- An activity-based budget
- Competition with other projects/activities for resources
- Uncertainty about results and costs

A successful project is recognized through several evolving definitions:

**Classic Definition**

- On time
- Within budget
- Meets specifications
- Meets or exceeds customer expectations

**Dynamic Definition**

- Major project stakeholders agree that project is successful after it's completed

**Business Definition**

- Project outcome aligned with business strategy
- Enough cash flow to cover expenses, make a profit, pay back cost of capital, and create shareholder value

For all endeavors that meet the definition of a project, it makes sense to invoke the process of project management and be successful. With everything else you can continue to do what you did yesterday, follow the recipe, leave it to chance, or hope that somebody else knows what they're doing. Sure, sometimes it's fun to see what happens when you are creative and avoid structure. But when it's important that the outcome be done right or on time or within a budget, then you have a project and need project management.

I also want to focus on a few behavioral approaches that permeate all activities throughout every project.

A requirements document includes a goal or project objectives statement. It says what you will accomplish, by when, and for how much. If you get this statement cleared

**Let's look at the process of project management:**

**Project Management**

**Resources**

Activity-Based Budget  
 Competes with Other Projects and Activities  
 People and Equipment

**Quality**

Customer Expectations  
 Meets Standards

**Scope**

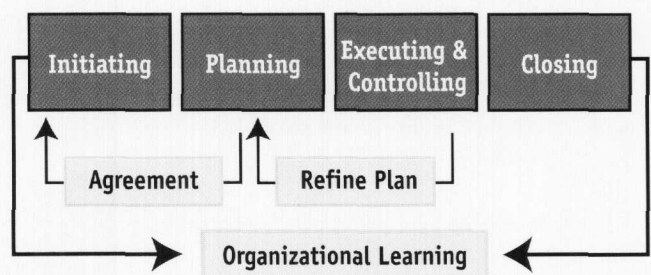
Newness of Tasks  
 Detailed Specifications  
 Unique Result

**Schedule**

Specific Time Limits  
 Divided into Small Steps  
 Milestones

and validated by your sponsor and partners, your work becomes much easier. Many projects suffer the plague of vague goals, scarce resources, and impossible deadlines. That should become the old story. Many teams I've facilitated through this step in the process are amazed by the power of clear, convincing, and compelling statements of purpose, vision, mission, and goals. People understand exactly what the project is about. Discussions then focus on how, not what, to do. This invokes their creative juices and leads to more productive projects. You are now embarking upon the new story.

**Some tasks that happen within each block are:**



A project manager manages the triple constraints of scope, schedule, and resources. You may recognize the mantra as, "I want it good, fast, and cheap." But the reality is that you can provide two out of three. Work with the team and sponsor to prioritize the most important and most constrained element. Is a deadline looming, such as a trade show, new product release date, or Y2K-like event that must be met? Or does the project require a set of specifications to be met for you to do what you can within a budget constraint? Once you know the most

important element, identify the second most important, moderately flexible element, and then the third, most flexible element. Use this agreement about priorities when making trade-off decisions. When creeping elegance appears, question if the feature is important for the first release or if it can be delayed to a subsequent project. When the customer pushes up the deadline, negotiate what features to drop. When resources are pulled away, arrange for more time to complete the project.

It takes courage to push back during these times. Act with conviction by drawing upon the universal interaction of these elements. They are laws that determine success or failure.

Do not set yourself up for failure by accepting impossible or unrealistic demands. You become more credible when you come from a data and process driven approach, not personal preference. Constantly refer back to the project goal and your commitment to it when under pressure.

Many management mistakes, such as rushing the planning process because it looks like nothing is happening, are made in times of anxiety. Use information to relieve that anxiety. Ask how your customer or stakeholders will use project information, and negotiate a project management information system that provides the minimum amount of effort to answer their questions and enables them to take appropriate actions. The same goes for project metrics, in general.

Also beware of the inherent pitfalls of poor communication! These include hiding insecurities, not revealing mistakes, not wanting others to know what you are doing, getting more work dumped on you, and being the messenger of bad news who gets “shot.” Since these pitfalls are everywhere, take explicit actions to demonstrate that you place greater value on good communication. Encourage people to share their concerns. Put effort into providing personalized feedback. Reward desired behaviors.

Be authentic in saying what you believe, and practice integrity in doing what you say and for the reasons you say. These values and practices become driving forces that command respect for you as a project manager and lead to successful projects.

### The Project Manager’s Garden

One may argue that much of what happens in nature is not a project, just ongoing cycles of creation and renewal. A fruit tree is a powerful metaphor and serves as a symbol for my practice. A gardener has to create an environment for the tree to flourish—you cannot command a tree to grow. Likewise, people in organizations have to create an environment for project success.

A tree’s root system absorbs nutrients from the soil; organizations develop theories from research. The nutrients

flow through the trunk and into the branches and leaves; theories turn into methods and tools that create results. These activities are repeatable because they derive from a solid (known) foundation (roots and theories). Repeatable project success requires that you invest in an innovative infrastructure (theories, methods, and tools) and then apply that practical knowledge to create results (fruit).

The whole process begins with seeds and seed distribution. Seeds represent the potential for an organization. All growth starts small. It then builds linkages and grows organically. Additional growth comes from new branches on old trees. Success creates seeds that seek fertile ground to grow into new opportunities. Likewise, every accomplishment starts small and has potential, when nourished with project management, to make a big impact.

Nature’s approach is random and may not serve our roles in organizations. An effective project manager learns that overlaying the project management process on nature’s ebb and flow is a powerful mechanism, capturing the best of both. You sense that something more than a chaotic environment is possible. Recognizing patterns of growth and people’s responses to challenges and feedback are tools in your toolkit. You are flexible and realize there are many different ways to reach a goal. It’s also okay to fail because you learn from these failures and immediately apply the learnings to your next project. Repeat or improve things that work, and stop doing or modify things that do not. You can hardly wait for the next project.

Ignoring environmental factors in a determined manner to achieve short-term success does not build a base for a long-term career. Instead, balance your approach toward performance (results), the experience of people on the project team, and learning. A single-minded focus on results may create stress, burnout, sabotage, and leave no time for learning. When this is the same pattern over time, it reduces the organization’s ability to achieve results. Make an effort to set people and project goals and to conduct project reviews, both during and after projects.

A preferred approach is to set a goal of:

- Identifying stimulating project results,
- Creating a positive, exhilarating, “this is fun” experience, and
- Learning about people, group dynamics, new skills, and ways to do things better.

Rather than becoming scarce, potential project members look at you and say, “Yes, I understand that what we’re doing is a project, and I want to work on it with you.” 🌍

**To learn more about completing projects, go to Randy Englund’s CE Course at SLA 2002 in Los Angeles.**