



# Dynamic Technologies Ltd

From Chaos to Control

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## White Paper

### 10 Rules for Highly-Effective Project Managers

Highly-effective project managers work smarter, not harder.

This isn't laziness; many people are working at, or past, the limit of healthy hard work, and it is damaging to businesses individually and the economy as a whole, as key people crumble from over-work. When you're down a hole, stop digging! We need to increase performance without killing each other – working smarter is the only answer. Oh, and recognizing the tiny percentage of genuinely lazy people and separating them out for individual attention, not tarring everyone with the same brush!

Over the years I've developed a set of guidelines that have become reinforced by forgetting them so often that I now regard them as rules. Like all good rules, they are for the guidance of the wise and the blind obedience of fools.

#### [RULE 1: Be there!](#)

Communications are the first thing to break down under pressure, plus human beings are primates and depend strongly on personal presence for leadership. When the going gets tough you need to BE THERE!

#### [RULE 2: Stop apportioning blame if humanly possible](#)

In this country, we have a culture of wasting time when things go wrong looking for who is to blame instead of fixing the problem. This drives a highly inefficient culture of back-covering and concealment of problems (the Leeson Effect).

The greatest efficiency and speed is achieved when people feel free to report problems BEFORE THEY EVEN HAPPEN, which is only practical in a blame-free culture. Openness and honesty about problems creates a pleasant and effective working environment in which challenges are addressed as a team, instead of everyone bickering over whose fault it is.

The worst business environment I ever experienced was in modern, architect-designed offices in beautiful grounds. It might be expected to have been a very pleasant place to work but had the worst "blame culture" I have ever seen. People were terrified of making the wrong decision and being punished for it, so they avoided making ANY decisions – the place was paralysed by fear while desperately needing to make large changes to survive. I learned a valuable lesson there and always strive to create a "no blame" culture wherever I work, and I've found repeatedly that it really pays off.

#### [RULE 3: Be easy and rewarding to help](#)

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This is a general human factors rule, but critically valuable in managing change. There are few people so deeply cynical that they don't get a buzz out of helping someone else, and you will perform better if those around you are all helping you – win:win!

Why doesn't this happen all the time? Why are we not all awash with help?

Helping others in a business environment is often not easy:

- Offering help is often seen as implied criticism, reflecting a lack of ability, so is rejected
- Helping others takes time and effort away from your own work, opening you to criticism in turn
- Help may be seen as interfering, meddling or "getting above oneself"
- Even where help is given successfully, there may be no recognition, for the reasons above

I have found that getting and giving help is a wonderful thing that moves things forward:

- You need to accept offers of help as a positive thing, while paying due diligence to unpleasant motives
- You need to ensure that any help given is tightly bounded to a manageable level, so the kind soul doesn't find they've opened a can of worms
- Formalize the help, scoping it and justifying its benefits to relevant stakeholders
- Thank them for their help, and then again
- Spread the word and your thanks

Once an example of help being recognized and rewarded is given, others feel motivated to help too.

### [RULE 4: Don't RELY on people showing initiative](#)

As a manager, I always encourage my team members to think for themselves and come up with ideas. I coach them in thinking ahead and planning for foreseeable eventualities, the result of which is that they usually display good levels of self-reliance and initiative, essential for adaptable and effective delivery.

However, the downside is that sometimes they don't. When the pressure rises, the comfort factor drops and people can fall back into their old habits of saying and doing nothing until receiving instructions. This can be like cruising at 70mph on the motorway and the gearbox suddenly slipping into 1st gear – a very rude awakening and potentially catastrophic.

At such times, it would be easy to revert to a "blame culture", but I've found that is counterproductive. Such lapses are to be forgiven, and additional coaching given, once the issue has been dealt with.

It is up to you to make sure adequate monitoring is in place to detect problems that are not actively flagged up, and the best tool I've found for this is milestones for the delivery of products. If the plan doesn't have clearly testable deliveries of products included, you are reliant on people to flag delays up on their own initiative, not fair on them and unwise of you.

Get plenty of testable milestones in the plan!

### [RULE 5: When the pressure looks like rising, manage YOUR workload first – the 3 Ds](#)

When things get harder - extra workload with no extra staff, issues to manage etc. - many, if not most, managers find it easier to take on more of the work themselves to try and cope; I certainly do and my friends and respected colleagues do too. It has real advantages:

- The most experienced resource is put on the job
- Communication overhead is minimised
- The extra work is done with full understanding of priorities and context

This is fine so long as it doesn't interfere with the management role itself, but working harder not smarter is a slippery slope. In most situations the extra workload grows imperceptibly and before long you're too busy "doing" to be managing effectively.

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The 3 tools I use to manage my workload and focus on what's important are:

1. Decline – is that task really important or just a nice-to-have? Decline tasks that are not adding significant value
2. Delegate – are you really the best person to be doing this UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES? If you can pass the work to someone else, do so – your job is to manage, not be a bluebottle
3. Defer – so the task is important – when does it really need to be done by? Check the deadline and schedule it for as late as reasonable and focus on more urgent tasks until then

Some people are totally ruthless in the way they do this, not bothering to explain, and come across as plain rude – not a good idea. When you use these tools, take your stakeholders with you – always explain why things are cancelled or delayed.

### [RULE 6: Keep communicating](#)

When the pressure rises, the first casualty is usually effective communications. It's a simple dilemma; do I fix the problem or talk to people about it? The natural tendency is to fix the problem at the expense of communication. Why is that the wrong choice?

- You want your stakeholders to learn from you what the problem is and what is being done about it. Lack of communication breeds uncertainty, which in turn breeds concern amongst your stakeholders if they learn about it any other way.
- Your stakeholders may be able to help! Keeping them on-side with you and your efforts builds trust and team spirit, and they may well want to help
- You may pick the wrong solution through the pressure on you and the lack of consultation

Of course, if you are adopting a rigorous risk management approach, issues arising where stakeholders don't know it's a possibility, and for which the contingency plans are not pre-approved, are few and far between!

### [Rule 7 – Don't let your performance in your own role slip because you're covering for someone else](#)

This is a bitter personal lesson and one I try to pass on to all my friends and colleagues.

It is very easy to take on additional work to cover for someone who isn't available (they've left, or are off sick, or are simply under-performing) and it seems certain that everyone will thank you for doing extra, and recognize the leadership you're displaying!

However, that can be a long way from the truth.

You are there to do a (usually) full-time job – if you are doing somebody else's (full-time) job too, chances are that your performance in your own role will be slipping.

You are likely to be so busy being the hero and doing someone's job (for which you were not recruited, and not paid ) that you don't excel at what you are there to do. This undermines your professional credibility. It's a painful realization that, even though you have pulled everyone's chestnuts from the fire, working 90 hour weeks, it is not appreciated or respected because you didn't do your own job as well as could be expected.

Now my motto is "Only do others' work if my own work is beyond reproach". Of course, there are times where I break this rule, but only for short times, and limited scopes. If the project doesn't have the resources needed, I say so to the client!

### [Rule 8 – Always keep an audit trail for all decisions, and keep up to date with the paperwork](#)

This is the one I find hardest to keep to!!!

The sad truth of the matter is that, no matter how hard we work to build trust and sincerity in a business relationship, there are those who will renege on an oral promise if it saves them money and there is no record.

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I still remember vividly working for a client whose customer assured him that he would pay for a certain piece of work, and when it came to the crunch, denied that he'd ever said it, and expected a company with fewer than 30 employees to pick up a huge bill for some "vanity" work that was a useless dead-end, done by a City web design agency. I felt bad because I hadn't managed to document it provably. As luck would have it, the project outcome was so successful that the sum involved was minor, but the principle holds true.

The counter-case was a joy from many years ago where a difficult and challenging project led to great customer satisfaction and easy sign-off, simply because the change control was rigorous and clearly documented – acceptance consisted of running through the updated requirements specification database, line by line, and since we'd agreed all changes and logged them explicitly, the customer was delighted to sign off their acceptance.

I find that documentation is the first thing to suffer when I get overloaded, so it's a great barometer of work pressure. It's symptomatic of my way of working that I rarely have an assistant in these projects – something I really need to address!

There is a fine line to draw between being distrustful/pedantic and keeping the relationship moving – in both cases the project was a success, even though there was a very different level of documentation cover.

Sadly, keeping good audit trails cannot always prevent project failure. In my career I've been involved in 2 projects where the supplier ended up in court. When this happens, audit trails are essential!

### [Rule 9 – If there isn't enough resource, say so! Don't struggle on in silence](#)

Brooks' Law states that "adding manpower to a late software project makes it later", laid out in Fred Brooks' 1975 book "[The Mythical Man-Month](#)". This is a good guideline, I've found, for most projects, when referring to the core project team. The implication is that project teams need to be adequately resourced BEFORE serious slippage occurs; it is the project manager's responsibility to make sure of that. Easier said than done, though.

The first challenge is to identify what is adequate resourcing, and what the shortfall is.

The second is to justify the need for funding/allocating additional resource when the project is on time to the client.

Planning for adequate resource isn't easy but it is straightforward; the primary need is the discipline to be constantly checking whether your resource forecast is still robust and aligned with the actual resources available.

The second I have always found to be more of a challenge and reflects the personal relationship between the project manager and the sponsor. It is virtually impossible to prove that additional resource is required when the project appears to be running on track so it is largely an act of faith by the sponsor to agree to the project manager's request.

The level of trust required for the sponsor to commit to such an act of faith is quite high even if it is backed up by convincing arguments. Underpinning all of this must be a good degree of personal rapport and professional respect.

I was recently reminded of this when out to dinner with a former client. We were discussing how we had delivered a [major NHS IT project](#) on time and budget. I pointed out that his vital contribution as CEO had been to authorize the resourcing needed to do it on time, rather than trying to penny-pinch. He was happy to confirm that this approach resulted in success both technically and commercially. It echoed my experience at Scottish Provident on their Year 2000 programme where investment in staffing upfront led to both success and low cost.

The sad comparison is an innovative global programme for a major FMCG manufacturer. This programme was consistently starved of resource for various reasons, leading to delays during Feasibility. Once it entered Build, a lot of additional resource was added but this led both to further delays and serious technical mistakes.

Early investment in staffing up a project really pays off.

### [Rule 10 – Never rush the planning!](#)

Fail to plan – plan to fail! A bit of a truism, but valuable none the less. Don't take forever over the planning, just don't skimp it.

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There is usually pressure to do things as quickly as possible, and to many executives, this means “start work now!” This creates a dynamic tension between the need to report progress and the need to work out how to achieve the right progress. Everyday English is full of sayings offering advice on this:

- Look before you leap
- More haste, less speed
- Measure twice, cut once
- A stitch in time saves 9
- Nine women can't make a baby in one month (Brooks)

and so on. So why, in business, is this ignored? I can only attribute it to said executives being out of touch with the reality of the situation at the coal face – I call this the “Excel Effect”.

As part of my teaching, I read many assignments about projects that have failed because the basic thinking-through of the problem was skipped at the beginning, and fundamental (and easily avoidable) errors were made that cost millions to fix. The build of Dungeness B nuclear power station was started well before the design was complete – unlike the other AGRs, it was 17 years in construction (10 years late) and way over budget. In a similar but smaller-scale project, a building was erected that proved too small to contain the plant intended to go inside!

How do I deal with this?

- Insist on the irreducible minimum of planning time at the beginning
- Get the design substantially complete before committing to build, then building the right thing quickly
- Identify long-lead critical path items that we must start – this shows progress – but continue planning in parallel
- Log all planning assumptions as risks, and manage the hell out of them!

I've found this works well (unless the sponsor is unwilling to listen, and has committed to impossible deadlines!)

Case studies are [NHS Direct website](#) and [THUS billing migration](#)

### [RULE ZERO: Follow the other rules!](#)

Since writing the original 10 rules, I've arrived at another one – RULE ZERO – follow the other rules!

I talk about disciplines, and when you are working in a **team**, that is straightforward because you can each cross-check the others. When there is no team behaviour as such, just individuals working to their own agenda, this cross-checking doesn't happen; it may even be impossible to get agreement to the right disciplines. Under those circumstances, discipline becomes self-discipline, and self-discipline can be a nightmare to maintain under pressure.

After a lengthy analysis of where I could have done better in one project, I found there were no new lessons to be learned – I just hadn't followed my own rules. In this instance, the culture of the organization stood firmly in the way of building an effective project team – everyone involved was an individual, with separate reporting lines and KPI, and conflicting demands on their time and no enthusiasm.

This made me realize how dependent I am on working within an effective team, and I'm adding a new check into my checklists:

“Have I got a team, or a group?”

If I have a team, all well and good – if not, then it has to be into strict procedural mode, even though it slows progress and drives up costs.