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THE ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECT MANAGER

CHRISTOPHER COOK

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Preface

Starting off as a laborer in the construction industry, I had the opportunity to see projects being run from a boots-on-the-ground perspective. Project managers drive around in their company vehicles, stop to look at a few things, then drive off—not to be seen the rest of the day. I thought to myself, "What an easy job!" Drive around, talk on the phone, look at plans, and do it all again the next day. Project managers were not the ones installing the storm sewer pipe or having to dig holes to expose underground utilities. They could escape the elements and go back to their air-conditioned vehicles or offices. Some of them even had the chance to go somewhere for lunch and enjoy their meal. It seemed like some far-off land.

I decided to make this my goal: How can I get out of these dirty jeans and ragged t-shirts and into a polo shirt and clean khakis? Going to college became a priority. Learning about management while still experiencing the troubles in the field became my advantage. At the same time, I was also learning about how to read plans and build estimates while putting those calculations to practice with my own two hands.

As time went on, I took on more of a leadership role, and more responsibility came my way. I started to get more involved with those project managers driving around in trucks discussing how the task was progressing and giving them feedback on the design. I saw this as an inducement to enhance my education by going to graduate school in project management. The discussions I was having in the field drove me to pursue a greater understanding of the science behind the thought process.

Attending graduate school led to the writing of this book. I was presented the opportunity to write about the project management profession. It was an honor. I started to look around at project managers and see what needed work. I would sit in the meetings, hear them talk, then observe how those messages

were translated. I would talk with field personnel to get their feelings on the direction of projects. I began realizing that the message being conveyed and the actions being taken were vastly different. The disconnect was evident, yet actions to bring the sides closer were not present.

These observations and my interest in other fields are the reasons for this book. My interest in sports and the team dynamics of project management have a closer correlation than appears on the surface. Also, my interest in philosophy started to rise. People have dealt with problems throughout history. Problems more severe than a project behind schedule or over budget. Problems that put people's lives at stake. Melding these dynamics together is the goal of this book. Using words from great philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Lao Tzu paired with teachings from great coaches such as Bob Knight and Bill Walsh shows how a project manager can apply the same techniques these people did to their situations.

No matter your industry or experience level, this book will give you mindsets to improve any project. The biggest improvements a project manager can make are about him- or herself. The individual can be the hardest obstacle to overcome. In writing this book, these techniques have been emphasized in my daily life. I find myself realizing how little control I actually have over events. All the right things can be said and done, yet the results are unpredictable. The tools and techniques used throughout the book will give you the ability to handle anything that may come your way.

An entrepreneur looks for opportunities. An entrepreneurial project manager becomes problem-seeking. Solving problems proactively puts you on another level from your contemporaries. This book was a learning and growing experience for me. I hope to pass along that same journey to you.

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About the Author

Over the past ten years, Christopher Cook, PMP, has spent his career in the construction industry. Aspects of the industry include heavy highway, aggregates, sewer, and grading roads. During this time, he earned his Bachelor's of Science in Industrial Technology Management with an emphasis in Building Construction Management, Master's of Science in Project Management, and Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification. In those years, he served as a laborer and worked his way up to estimator and master scheduler roles. Serving in these various roles has provided many opportunities to monitor and control projects from headquarters. The portfolio of projects is in the tens of millions of dollars annually. Working side by side with operations, he has the technical skills necessary for daily work while learning the management way of doing things to serve as a better manager. He is a member of the local Project Management Institute (PMI) chapter in Denver, Colorado. Having the right education and technical background has proven vital to his success and continued growth in the industry. He shares his project management insights weekly through "The EntrePMeur" blog (http://entrepmeur.wpengine.com).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Project managers have the technical skills to handle any project. You have studied the materials, worked in the industries, and provided the guidance for success. My approach is to assume those technical skills and build on your ability to lead a team through philosophies (mindset changes), sales, childlike thinking, adapting, and narrowing down the topics you focus on to take advantage of the time you have. This new approach brings an entrepreneurial spirit to the project management world. You want to take the tools and techniques you have learned over the years and expand them to new heights. Entrepreneurs are constantly changing and adapting to the world around them. They have to stay cutting edge to make their businesses thrive. Staying cutting edge is the approach I want you to take into project management. Instead of business, it will be a project, but the principles will be relatable to any discipline. The goal is to take your technical skills as a project manager, add the elements of an entrepreneur, and create a high-powered team around you as well as becoming the best project manager you can be.

Entrepreneur. A word that describes creative, driven, goal-oriented individuals, usually in a business sense. My goal throughout this book is to bring this word *entrepreneur* to the project management landscape. Joining an organization should not limit the ability for an individual to thrive creatively and to use unique abilities to lead a team to success. The landscape of the corporate world lies in red tape and an inability to move forward quickly. Having an entrepreneurial mindset in that landscape proves difficult because of its limitations and slow processes. The larger the organization, the longer it takes for an initiative to take hold. This situation is where the entrepreneur can come in, find ways around those obstacles, and thrive in an organization that has proven difficult.

Being efficient is not good enough; effectiveness coupled with that efficiency proves greater. Bill Gates once said, "The first rule of any technology used in a business is that automation applied to an efficient operation will magnify the efficiency. The second is that automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency" (Gates, 2016). The same goes for applying an entrepreneurial mindset. If you get to be extremely efficient at answering emails and getting to inbox zero, but none of those emails pertains to important tasks at hand, you are magnifying the inefficiency. No one wants to add to the problem. Putting your head down and getting to work may be the worst thing you can do for an organization that is realizing its inefficiencies. Bring the creative, solution-oriented stylings of an entrepreneur to that setting and dominate.

Aggressive may be another term used for an entrepreneur, as someone who sees a problem and is not afraid to tackle it immediately. Later on, I will discuss ways to identify a problem, find its solution, and become the go-to person for solving problems. How valuable would that be for your organization? Having a group of individuals actively seeking problems to solve instead of running from them and looking for others to step up and solve them for you. That is exactly what an entrepreneur brings to the table. Entrepreneurs can use the vast resources of an organization along with their aggressive attitudes toward problems to create a completely different atmosphere. Getting these people into the project management role and leading teams can have deep impacts throughout an organization.

Part of the entrepreneurial spirit dives into the depths of the person. Philosophy is a key aspect of knowing not only your team but who you are. Going 100 miles an hour and not stopping to smell the roses has impacts on relationships within your team and organization. While hard work is the desired attribute of any project manager, there has to be a time for reflection. Is this the right direction for the organization? Is the team working on projects that satisfy the goals of the organization? Am I doing the best I can at leading this team? Do I actively seek out problems to solve, or am I being reactive? These questions and many more are involved with the deeper essence of what a project manager needs to do. Being the first to show up and the last to leave are great characteristics, but if they are misdirected, what good does that do? Allowing yourself those moments of reflection can prove to be a multiplier for results.

Some ways to reflect are through meditation or the reading of philosophy. The philosophies I choose to illustrate project management techniques are Stoicism and Taoism. They lead to practical applications and are not built on whimsical tales. Philosophy has a connotation for being boring and leading to dull conversations about potential truths or answers to higher-than-thou questions. This existential approach is not taken in this book. Both Stoicism and Taoism can be used immediately and applied to your team from day one.

Stoicism is built on a practical application to solving issues you encounter daily, not discussing higher-level topics. Kings would use this philosophy to help deal with problems throughout their land. As a project manager, you are the "king" of your team. You must rule as such. The same applies to Taoism. It is a mindset shift. While you are the "king," you must think of yourself as an equal or lower among your team. In this way, your message will be clearer and more accepted, because you are speaking to them on an even playing field rather than talking down from your mountaintop. Each chapter in this book will have a discussion of both philosophies and how they pertain to the topic at hand. Again, you have the technical skills. Now it is time to add the exponential skills that will pay dividends.

Being different is another aspect of selling yourself as an entrepreneurial project manager. If people are starting to talk about how you have changed, you are doing something right. If you continue to go unnoticed, you will not have the influence on teams or senior management to get done the things you have in mind. Make yourself known for being the person who delivers. Use philosophy or motivation to get your team in the right mindset to take on the tasks at hand. Authenticity throughout is important while developing a new mindset. The way you deliver a message has more impact than the message itself. In grade school, there was a teacher who made this point through heavy-metal music. He said the lyrics would be about love or a relationship or a state of mind. Put to that style of music, it would always get his adrenaline going and the blood pumping. If you deliver a message about teamwork yet you are constantly in your office with the door closed, your message is not going to affect the team in the ways you had hoped, just like those songs lyrics. If they are set to a harp or piano, the message may be clearer and understood and gave the emotional response expected.

This book wants to bring out the child in each person who reads it. Using your child mind lends to the creativity needed to solve problems. Think back to when you were a kid and could play out an entire movie using blankets for capes and sticks for weapons. Now, as adults, those would seem silly and keep us engaged for a fraction of the time our child minds were occupied. When having team meetings, allow the kid to come out within yourself and others. You will be shocked at how many suggestions get brought up and the walls that come down with the simple change of mindset. Use that mindset to choose projects about which you have passion.

When I was in grade school, I wanted very badly to become a cartoonist. I would draw cartoons with different characters and try to create storylines—taking ideas from newspapers and reusing them, but with the people I had created. My mediocre talents were proudly displayed on the kitchen refrigerator and were read by an audience of two. Now, getting the chance to be creative

is something I look for in a project. This book is one aspect of that creativity and why I wanted to write it. Think back to what interested you as a child and find those attributes in the projects your organization's executives select. Most of you may not have that choice, but you can find the attributes in the projects selected for you. People tend to find the negatives in something. I am one of those individuals. When you flip that around and look for positives, there are more than first recognized, especially through a child's eyes. There was a show on television in which people were shown a painting and had to name as many things that painting could represent. The number of items named generally ranged from three to seven. Once the presenter told them to see this painting through the eyes of a child, those numbers more than doubled. Our adult brains have limited our capacity to be creative through the experiences we have had.

When a project is similar, analogous estimating is useful. That same thought process cannot be used when trying to figure out problems for a new project. Because a project is similar does not mean the same techniques will work for it again. Road construction is a prime example. Roads all seem fairly similar on the surface. Below the surface is where the issues lie. Soil types can change from street block to street block. Utilities on a project can begin or end, depending on location.

Find projects or organizations that relate to your passions. There are projects out there that need your creativity to solve the issues. The result of the project can be creative too. Think of any building project. The nooks and crannies of that building are designed by someone with a creative mind. I had a boss who built his house using 45-degree angles for all interior walls. Most interior walls are at 90 degrees, but he decided to add that extra flare to turn an ordinary wall into a conversation. Even if you are not interested, you still have to ask, "Why?" Those little details of a project may seem mundane at the outset but can have impactful results on the customer or client. Out of 100 homes, how many have 45-degree-angled interior walls? The number is closer to 0 than it is to 100. If you are into sports, why not try to work on the project for building a new sports arena? How cool would it be to see your favorite sports team in an arena you helped build? Your passion may be writing. Think about how neat it would be to work with an author or director you have admired. These opportunities are possible.

Entrepreneurs rely on being a one-stop shop for the people doing business with them. This attitude is a huge asset and applies directly to project managers. How many times are you approached with a question and expected to answer immediately? No matter the subject, you are looked to for answers. This situation is where your entrepreneurial spirit is summoned. Entrepreneurs are looked to for ideas on solving problems they have not necessarily seen before. It is that creative mind showing itself. As a project manager, you will have to "fake it before you make it." Even when you think you have made it, there will

be instances of fakery to portray the strong leader that you are. Do not take this as a weakness in your game. Show your team the spontaneous problem-solving skills it takes to become the best project manager. You are the chief executive officer (CEO) of your team, as is the entrepreneur the CEO of a business.

1.1. Philosophy

In college, philosophy was a required class to fulfill the graduation requirements. At the time, I treated it as such. Turn in the assignments with an attitude of "C's get degrees." Looking back, I should have taken advantage of the professor's knowledge of the area and tried to apply it to my life. My appreciation for philosophy has grown immensely since that time. Beginning to read more jump-started this involvement with philosophy. Instead of relying on people around me to structure my way of thinking, I began to seek out information in books. Books are a timeless resource that provides a glimpse into the trials and tribulations of others who have continued down similar paths in life. My approach to reading had always been that movies are so much better, quicker, and easier to hold my attention than books. A movie takes two hours to watch, while a book may take me two weeks to read. Of course, I would rather watch the movie instead. And, of course, people would always tell me the book is better than the movie. I would respond with an eye roll and continue about my day. Once work became slow and movies were not an option, I decided on books and have not looked back since. They have provided a wealth of knowledge from people I will never get the opportunity to meet. Philosophy books made me realize that these issues we have with projects and people have been around for centuries. There is not one right answer, but philosophy provides the mental tools to handle most situations.

I apply these teachings daily as a way to test myself physically and mentally. I go into the work day knowing that everything will not turn out the way I had hoped or planned. The idea is to see the problem through the eyes of the other individual as opposed to seeing only your own personal viewpoint. Take the time to understand the situation wholly and then come to a conclusion. I always allow myself to take a minute when something does not go right, to collect my thoughts and even move physically to arrange them in my head. Simply going for a walk or stretching for a minute can improve decision making immensely. Desk jobs constrict the physical movement one can do throughout the day. The thinking is that if you are not at your desk, you must not be working. Find ways to move around and keep the blood flowing. Do not sit stagnant because that is how you think the job should be performed. Perform the work the way you want, and the results will show. If you do not take this route, your life and