

TLC Showcase

Pete Smith



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Introduction to *Project Management – All You Need Is Love*

I once heard bacon described as the gateway drug for escaping vegetarians. ‘Surely one little bacon sandwich won’t hurt?’ the dealer entices.

Project Management – All You Need Is Love is my gateway book. I have spent my life writing – meeting minutes, training materials, strategy papers. The document titles became a little more interesting as my career as a Project Manager progressed, but fundamentally the subject matter was plain and bland. Excruciatingly tedious, with little scope for creativity. Well, some of the Progress Reports maybe ... But an early love of the works of Jane Austen, long before Colin Firth made it verboten for a young straight guy to express an interest, has stayed with me. I love to read, and I have always wanted to write. Something with meat in it.

So this is it. I know a lot about Project Management. The challenge is to make it interesting. The good news is that there are already many hundreds of books setting out Project Management theory, so there is no need to do that again. And an interesting point is that while most business projects have failed, they didn’t fail because of some misunderstanding of the theory. They failed because the right people didn’t care; there was no passion, no love. I have always thought John Lennon got it about right. It’s all you need.

I have tried to write a book which talks about that passion to succeed, a book which would be interesting to a much wider audience than Project Managers. More than a ‘how to’, it is also a sort of memoir. My business life has taken me from Peru to Ethiopia, from Manchester to Hanoi. I have worked for some of the world’s largest corporations and governments but also spent many years with Save the Children, seeing another side of the world.

I approached TLC with considerable trepidation when the preparation for my bacon sandwich was already well underway. I feared that approaching them too early

would simply elicit a reply of ‘don’t bother’. The world does not need yet another Project Management theory book. I wanted to scream ‘But this isn’t just another Project Management book’; I thought it best to write most of it first to convince both myself and TLC of that. So the first response from TLC was critical for me. All first writers must fear the worst, and here was I submitting a book to TLC which I wasn’t sure they’d get at all. They could just look at the subject matter and put it on the same pile as hopeful submissions from Harry-Twilight wannabes. *Tiffany the Vampire Layer – a true story of teenage blood and lust in Acton*. The response from the TLC reader, Karl French, was however quite fantastic. He had read it, thought about it, got it, and identified the central problem. He made many specific helpful suggestions to the text, but clearly set out that books that span readily defined genres don’t sit well with publishers. And because of that, many agents would shy away. He was extremely supportive about the book (far more than I had dared hope), but cautious about the road to publication. Since then, I have been working with Rebecca Swift at TLC trying to find an agent to help me through the challenge that Karl identified. Because of TLC’s involvement, my manuscript is getting read by the right people, something I know I couldn’t achieve on my own.

Extract from *Project Management – All You Need Is Love*

It was one of those autumn days in the early 1990s that seems so English. Cold but not freezing, damp but not wet . . . a heated debate on the train as to whether the rain would better be described as ‘drizzle’ or ‘mizzle’ . . .

I was on my way to the Arsenal football ground in North London to pick up a cheque for Save the Children. A club donation doubtless to offset their recent run of bad press. Nothing to do with results on the pitch, just the usual cocktail of managerial impropriety, player infidelity and fan misbehaviour.

I couldn’t care less why they were giving; cash was cash. There would probably be a toothy publicity picture of their manager George Graham handing me the cheque as we shook hands and I would, I hoped, disappear long before the tedium of their evening game against Wimbledon. This was years before the novel concept of playing attractive football to entertain crowds caught on in that part of the world; an Arsenal game against Wimbledon back in the day had to be sanctioned by Air Traffic Control so that low flying passenger jets could avoid the higher mis-kicks.

I caught the tube up to their Highbury Stadium enjoying the locals debate the weather and arrived at about 4pm on a Wednesday afternoon. It was well over three hours to kick off but there was already a buzz in the air. Kids were hanging around the main gate hunting for player’s autographs – I walked past trying to look important. What does an owner of a football club look like? Or an agent? Maybe one of the players’ dads? None of them asked me to sign anything. Little shits.

Explaining who I was at reception, I was immediately whisked into corporate hospitality and given a glass containing a familiar cold, bubbly liquid. One sip was all that was needed to tell – Krug, and not the cheapest one at that. At least a hundred quid a bottle, off-sale. Obviously George was running late and I was being placated.

I am never quite sure if it was after the fourth or fifth top-up that I lost count. All these years on, some of the less important details are blurred. I am not sure as to

whether this is because of the excellence of the champagne or the passing of time. The key events are however indelibly etched. Indelibly . . .

A few other guests begin to arrive in corporate hospitality. We make small talk where I seem to remember that as the bubbles slip down I am particularly witty, erudite and engaging. At least / think so. But all the while that one wine waiter remains focused on *my* glass. The other guests are hardly going dry, but clearly none of them are being placated in quite the same way.

I glance at my watch; worryingly near six pm. I have visions of Mr Graham bustling his way to the changing room being reminded by his secretary he had one last important job to do before his pre match talk . . . but no sign of him. The clock is ticking.

The wine waiter duly refills again and I start for the first time in my life to get a warm feeling about this venerable institution, the Arsenal. I was born south of the river in Brixton in the 1950s, well-before it was mockneyfied by the arriveste sons and daughters of Britain's white middle class in their holy grail search for street cred. So by accident of birth I had – indeed have – a profound genetic distrust of anything hailing from the North side of town. But as I anecdote away to a coterie of fascinated club sponsors and their friends, it begins to dawn on me that the wine waiter has been given a briefing:

'Poor bloke working for a charity, probably never gets a decent drink in his life. Take special care of him, John. Rather he got our good stuff than those corporate hangers-on'.

And they are going to give me a cheque for 25k. What a nice bunch of people they are, I've clearly misjudged them all these years. They have however profoundly underestimated the amount of fine vintage champagne I have managed to quaff away.

7pm. The last chance gone. He's bound to be in the changing rooms now. That

means they want to do it after the match. They could have said, otherwise I wouldn't have wasted these last four hours . . . drinking Krug. Maybe not such a waste. Oh well, I'll watch the match and pick up the cheque afterwards – I've had worse evenings.

7:15 and the players are out on the pitch, warming up, fifteen minutes to kick off. The flight-paths for Heathrow and Stansted have been altered. Time for just one more before the match starts. My waiter comes towards me; I raise my glass in anticipation but to my surprise he takes it from me:

'This way, sir'.

The waiter puts a hand on my shoulder and leads me through a side door, down some steps. We go through one door, then another, his pace quickening. We come to a fire exit. He pushes the bar open and beckons me through.

I am on the touch line. It's now night time and the sky is as dark as a London sky ever gets, but the stadium is ablaze in the glow of artificial lights. There's a crowd of 30,000 people. Noises and smells. And a besuited and smiling George Graham is fifty yards away on the half way line, with one of those giant cardboard cut out cheques. All I have to do is to walk across the pitch, shake his hand and collect it. I gaze up to the jumbo TV screen and see the camera focus in on me. Thirty thousand heads turn in my direction.

I realise at once what had been going on; no one with any sense would walk out across a football pitch in front of a full crowd for a publicity shot of a fake cheque being presented to you. If you weren't well and truly placated first, that is. And I am.

So without fear or trepidation, I step on to the Highbury turf. And without any organisation, any preparation, any coordination, thirty thousand people look at me on the giant TV screen and start to chant with one voice:

'YOU FAT BASTARD, YOU FAT BASTARD.'

I smile as I stroll across the ground, bowing and waving to the most vocal elements of the crowd with what I hope is a particularly irritating grin affixed on my face. The chant repeats in a continuous loop. This is easy, this is my day job. I am a Project Manager. I spend every day of my life trying to achieve a fairly simple goal like walking fifty yards to get some cash with thousands of people standing on the touchline hurling abuse at me. Welcome to my world.

If there were ever such a thing as an effective aptitude test for aspiring Project Managers, then that walk would probably be about the best you could devise. You need to realise that the onlookers do not exactly want you to fail – most of them want you to pick up that cheque – but they would be delighted to see you slip over in the mud along the way. If you aren't even prepared to take the first step in front of the baying mob, then don't take the job. But get a few paces on, and enjoy the moment. Revel in it. Get over the fact that the joke is on you. Yes, you could be a Project Manager.

The chanting didn't stop all the way to the middle, but I took a bow when I got there and I thought I heard some applause. A friend of mine who unbeknown to me at the time happened to be in the crowd later denied this – he was sure that the abuse continued all the way back too. But by then I had the money, I had the prize, and I was fairly certain I could dink another glass of Krug out of my friendly waiter. The world was good again.

I've been a project manager or managed other project managers for longer than I care to remember. I've worked around the world in a dozen different industries, I've worked for vendors and customers and I hope to carry on doing so after this book is published. As well as being my work, it's something I enjoy. Which is worth confessing at the outset - the job can be so damn difficult that irrespective of what they pay you, you couldn't really do the job well unless you enjoyed it. It's not that I enjoyed recounting the You Fat Bastard story at countless dinner-parties for years *afterwards* (that's the easy bit); I enjoyed it at the time. A rhino-thick skin and an unassailable ego are definitely essential parts of your tool-kit.

As I want to have a career after this book is published, a few discreet veils had to be drawn as I trawled through my past. Whenever a company I've worked with in overall terms comes out well – and there are many – I've usually named them. So you'll see name-checks for world-class organisations such as Hilton, Unilever, Diageo, Save the Child Fund etc. Whereas other stories will just mention 'implementing in Manchester' as I have worked with some complete and utter showers too, and in many senses the lessons learnt from these are more intriguing. Sometimes I've messed names around to try to avoid being sued too much, but I would be surprised if anyone who knows me doesn't already know what part they might play in this narrative. As for Manchester, as every head teacher has uttered in morning assembly tinged with that note of personal disappointment, 'You know who you are'.

I have of course applied some common sense discretion. For example, I won't under any circumstances name the mobile internet provider who encouraged a group of staff to make a mockumentary broadcast-quality video about the advantages of hand-held computers for international drug dealers; facial recognition during handovers, stock management, customer satisfaction surveys etc. As a teambuilding exercise you understand – it wasn't actually a sales campaign, at least I think not. Oh all right, since you've pressed me it was AvantGo, but I only agreed to play Pablo Escobar because of an uncanny physical resemblance. It was just the casting director (in real life the Marketing Director, Catriona) who saw me as a power crazed megalomaniac hell bent on achieving my objectives irrespective of the cost to innocent bystanders. And what, do I ask, does a Marketing Director know about Project Management?

So if you aren't the sort of person who would enjoy making that walk, if your colleagues don't see you as a potential leader of some grand underworld crime movement, you probably aren't looking for a role as a leading Project Manager. And 'role' really is the right word; you act the part, you play the character. You need to appear larger than life, sidestepping all the arrows and slings that they cast in your direction. But never forgetting you are merely a player.

I can't quite pretend that Project Management is the new rock'n'roll. It is way too much hard work for that; seventy, eighty, a hundred hour weeks are part of your life. The pay is good but nowhere near what it should be for what you have to do. And probably the biggest difference of all is that there are on balance rather fewer groupies - although I have often thought ours are significantly better looking.

Text books on Project Management there are aplenty. A few of them are even written by people who've done the job. The theory is no secret and is staggeringly dull. Absolutely mind blowingly dull. People will write chapters as to whether you should assess risks as High, Medium and Low or 1, 2 and 3. As if it mattered. All you want to know about risks as a Project Manager is which one is going to nail you and whether you have a get out of gaol card. If you think writing it down and shading it a particular shade of crimson is going to help, I'd give up now if I were you.

If you google 'what percentage of projects fail' you can pick your number in reply. Maybe 62%, a lot of votes for 68%, 70% has its fans. That's an awful lot of projects failing, costing an awful lot of money. Only a tiny number of them fail because of a theory malfunction. Theory has 10% to do with the world of a Project Manager. This book is about the rest. If you follow the advice set out in the book you definitely will have a better chance of success and your project will be more fun. There is also a binding contractual commitment that your sex life will be improved.¹

The job is easy once you understand it. All you have to do is put the band together for one more gig, blast out your best set and blow them all offstage. Sod it. Project Management *is* the new Rock'n'Roll.

¹ On the advice of my lawyers; to clarify, this binding contractual commitment is only applicable in countries where you can't be sued for making false promises. In other countries, please substitute 'will' with 'might'.

About the Writer

Pete Smith has delivered major business projects in well over one hundred countries around the world and is still looking for pastures new; his critics say this is because even now he finds it easier to attract new audiences than write new jokes.



He argues that his varied career throughout international Construction, Hospitality, Property, Finance and Not-For-Profit organisations shows his flexibility and ingenuity. Others point to his air-mile collection.

On a more serious note, his work at Save the Children was described by HRH The Princess Royal as '...[having] made an unparalleled contribution to the effectiveness of the organisation worldwide'. The fans of one leading Premier League football club however voiced their collective opinion that Princess Anne had overlooked a more obvious assessment of his character.

In *Project Management: All You Need Is Love*, Pete explains the views of the Arsenal fans as he recounts anecdotes and events from his career. His central argument is that it is easier to learn from the mistakes and catastrophes of others than it is to contrive your own. It is, he suggests, certainly less painful.

Born and raised in South London, Pete now lives in Dubai, UAE with his Australian wife Sarah. His rugby-playing days long behind him, he remains an ardent fan of London Wasps. As with all true sports fans, he hopes for an unprecedented injury crisis to decimate his club's playing strength so that the manager has no alternative but to grant him his wish for one more game. Even now, he is waiting expectantly by the phone.