

# MAKING A MARK

All you need to do to master the art of project management for the first time is, erm, pretend you're a bamboo stick, says **Marge Lowhar**. (And yes, it really does work)

**O**ften I am faced with bright-eyed and eager-to-get-started project managers taking on their first role. But I know, both from experience and from much-quoted statistics, that the failure rate for projects is painfully high; somewhere between 25-55% depending on the source. Consequently, I start my presentations with a bamboo stick... Not to administer discipline, you understand, or to beat sense into these enthusiastic newbies, but more on that later.

What I know - and what they will soon find out - is that there are five principal issues that affect the success of project managers. They are a lack of clarity regarding project objectives; inadequate planning; poor relationship with sponsors; people problems; and poor or inadequate communication.

Simple as that all sounds, when you're caught up in the project, these issues are also simple to forget. So keeping a checklist - like this one - to hand will remind you of your core objectives, even when you're bogged down with the detail of your project.



**Marge Lowhar** is an organisational development consultant, trainer and coach at Tranzition, [tranzition.co.uk](http://tranzition.co.uk).

## 1

### UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE TAKING ON

The first thing a project manager needs is a clear picture of what exactly they are expected to achieve. By that I mean, do we really know what stakeholders expect the end product to look like; the time frame and budget constraints, and why they wanted it in the first place? It is not unusual to find that what's expected is different, so make sure you have an up-to-date picture and a clearly-defined project scope.

## 2

### REMEMBER WHOSE NECK IS ON THE LINE

It may surprise you to know it's your sponsors. Regardless of what you may have been told, they are accountable for project delivery. They agreed it, they know more about the politics around it, and they will feel the pain if it fails. That doesn't mean that you won't have to answer if the project goes belly-up, as responsibility has been delegated to you. But remember who owns the project, get to know your sponsors, and keep them informed and on your side. Projects throw up challenges, and you may have to deal with difficult issues and people. In those situations, having a sponsor with whom you have built a good relationship is very handy.

## 3

### PLAN TO WIN

Remember, a high percentage of projects fail. Project failure often starts when the project has barely begun. It is often easier than one may think to see a project that will falter or fail just from looking at what happens at the planning stage. Planning is not just about software, lists of tasks and charts, and good planning allows you to identify resources, assess risks and develop schedules. It is also about considering who will be involved and how stakeholders will be managed. You don't win just because you are a hard worker, or have lots of technical experience. You have to plan to win.

## 4

### PEOPLE POWER

Managing projects usually involves managing people. And people are the number one reason projects succeed or fail. So get good at working with people. A great place to start is by checking yourself. How well do you know yourself? Would you choose you to be on your project team? Until you know your strengths and weaknesses, until you can look at how you handle your emotions and how they affect other people, you are probably a danger to the emotional health and achievement of others. Managing people starts with self-management, followed closely by taking a deliberate decision to influence and persuade others. To do this you need to develop your communication skills. Communicate to inform, to make others feel valued, to show empathy, to gain support and clarify agreement. To be blunt, if you fail to communicate you fail to manage.

## 5

### BE LIKE BAMBOO

Would you like to see a picture of the ideal project manager? Try your local gardening centre. You're looking for bamboo: It is strong and bendable but not easy to break. That's probably a hard ask for those new to project management but the ability to be flexible yet firm and to deal with changes while still moving forward are skills you will have to learn and use as a project manager. So, like bamboo, develop the ability to be firmly rooted but flexible in order to give and get the best from yourself and others. (See, we told you the analogy really does make sense.) ■