

Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects

## Management Beliefs

### Reflecting on the Unstated

Recently I was flummoxed during a discussion of current trends in management. Several core beliefs guide my thinking about the best ways to manage projects. They are so deeply held that I rarely stop to think about them explicitly. In the discussion, I rashly took it for granted that other people held similar underlying beliefs, resulting in a disjointed and confused dialog.

Reflecting on that experience, I took time to summarize some of my core beliefs about management. They were forged in the peculiar world of high technology research and development, followed by more years consulting to management in a wide range of industries. Here are five of them.

1. Be a pragmatist, not a purist.
2. Just enough is often best.
3. Plan (enough). Flex (a lot).
4. People and relationships trump methodology and tools.
5. Micro-management is self-defeating.

### Five Assumptions

**1 Be a pragmatist rather than a purist** when it comes to management methodologies and frameworks. Such things are means to an end, not ends in themselves. I'll happily mix and match bits and pieces from different approaches, such as PMBOK and agile, as long as they are effective

for the situation I'm in. That's why I'm encouraged by the rising interest in hybrid frameworks, which mix predictive and agile project management within the same organization and sometimes even on the same project.

**2 Just enough is often the best approach.** Striving for perfection is often the enemy of being good enough. Especially when upgrading organizational capabilities, a theoretically elegant and correct solution often fails. The change required to implement it is too large and intimidating, so buy-in suffers and adoption falters. A less perfect but simpler solution actually works better.

**3 Plan (enough). Flex (a lot).** Projects are in the middle of constant change. Without some degree of planning, they will get swallowed up in the resulting tumult. However, being able to flex and adapt to changes is equally key. A successful project organization must be good at both planning and flexing, and it must be skilled at varying the balance between them. Thus, I like project approaches that emphasize progressive, incremental planning, such as rolling wave and iterative.

**4 People and relationships trump methodology and tools.** I've seen high performance teams do amazing things. Don't misunderstand me. Process and tools are important, too, when they enable good people to work together to use their skills "at the top of their certification." People and process are inextricably

intertwined and absolutely necessary in any project environment.

**5 A controlling or micromanaging leadership style doesn't work well**, especially on projects that must create and apply complex knowledge. Good leaders facilitate more than they bark orders. They share power and information. They build an environment where teamwork, trust and prudent risk-taking are the norm. But when it is necessary,

a good leader also drives accountability, makes hard and unpopular decisions, and pushes back.

### What About You?

I'm sure I have more deeply embedded and usually unstated beliefs about project work, but these five jumped to the fore when I reflected on that discussion.

What beliefs guide your thinking about projects and management?

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### About the Author

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