



The Project Assassin

Proven Techniques for Glorious Failure:

Lesson 2: Train Like Vikings!



Welcome back, my pupils. In our second lesson, you'll learn another broadly employed technique which virtually guarantees colossal project failure. Nothing is more critical to project management success than the selection and development of qualified project managers. Hence, it is a key point of vulnerability and the subject of this lesson's attack. <bwa ha ha>

I've compiled a list of traits from leading project management literature. An excellent Project Manager must "simply" be a practical down-to-earth inspirational visionary, a flexible disciplinarian, an executive everyman, an accountable delegator, an agenda-less politician, a cautious risk-taker, a patient taskmaster, an empathetic driver, a joint techno-business guru and still be boldly confident in his humility. If you think not, I defy you to identify which characteristics aren't essential. Fortunately for you aspiring project assassins, few individuals were born with all of these abilities besides William Wallace (Braveheart), Maximus (Gladiator) and other epic Hollywood characters.

With the importance of the project manager role so clear, you must be wondering how to convince your organization to choose a poor one. It is easier than you can imagine.

- *Select an "extra."* Remind leadership that the very best managers cannot be spared for such a lowly project. They are already managing something far more important in day-to-day operations - merchandising, production

scheduling, logistics, the pipeline or the accounting function. Appoint “whoever can be spared” as project manager. Mention that while today’s widgets must be shipped, anyone can design for the future while leading a successful business transformation. Sound difficult to pull off? You’d be amazed at how often this occurs.

- ***Learn from the infamous Peter.*** According to the Peter Principle, *employees within an organization will be promoted to their highest level of actual competence and then be promoted one more time and remain forevermore at the level wherein they are incompetent.* In IT projects, too often it is assumed that the best technical resources are the best project manager candidates. While the skills required to succeed as project manager are much different than technical design and construction expertise, it is regularly viewed as a “natural progression.” This is no truer than suggesting that the best players always make the best coaches. In reality, only a select few can make this transition.
- ***Train like Vikings.*** Legend states that Vikings taught their young to swim by tossing them into the sea. Some swam instantly while others who sank were deemed unworthy to be Vikings. It was truly “sink or swim.”

Companies often do the same thing by anointing new project managers and tossing them into the sea with the company’s future tied securely to their ankles. Any company where “Make it happen” and a copy of Microsoft Project fully summarize the project manager initiation is ripe for project disaster. <Nhuahh ha ha haaaa>

- ***Shoot project managers quickly when they stumble.*** This would be virtually all of them at some point in their early development. Successful project management is a balancing act between all of the listed traits... and it takes experience to get one’s balance. By encouraging swift execution upon the first mistake, you can ensure the hard-knock lessons learned will stump the aspiring project manager. Shoot them, put the next person in your sniper scope and start the process all over again. Even Maximus and William Wallace died at the end of their movies. Why should project managers fare better?

These techniques are “can’t miss”—they’ve been proven in small and large organizations alike. Why do they do it? Because few appreciate the traits required in an excellent project manager or truly consider the fallout when those traits are absent.

My aspiring Project Assassins, I leave you with this parting thought from the greatest Viking of them all...

“Everybody likes to be missed, even if it’s only by a rock.” - Hagar the Horrible



Avalion Tip: Your biggest projects require your best talent - don't hold back. The people you can least spare should lead a major transformation initiative - if you're serious about success. They must have drive, vision, leadership and appropriate attention to detail. Sending who we can spare to do a project is a recipe for disaster. You should postpone all projects until the right resources can be committed.

Avalion Tip: Treat project management as a real career. Many universities are now offering degrees in project management. It is a discipline like accounting, engineering, or supply chain management. Successful project management requires a unique combination of skills and excellent judgment. The right individuals must be selected, developed and rewarded like other disciplines. Dedicated project managers often commit many evenings and weekends. Hang onto your good ones –they are hard to find and even harder to replace.

Avalion Tip: Project management books and classes provide insufficient training. Project management is truly learned "in the trenches" via apprenticeship beside experienced project managers. Beyond structured learning and certifications, the knowledge and judgment of others is passed on via coaching, peer relationships and review gates where others can share their hard knocks. This should be done in the ongoing course of leading projects, not just as a classroom preparation.

Final Observation: Maybe the correct phrase is "THINK or thwim."

About the Author: While the identity and whereabouts of the Project Assassin remain unknown, Kevin Christ, Vice President of IT Services with Avalion Consulting, has spent his career battling the Project Assassin and his forces in program management, project management and troubled project turnarounds. He is known for his business acumen, his technical insight and a troubling sense of humor. Kevin has been a management consultant for almost 25 years and his full profile can be found at www.linkedin.com/in/kchrist. He can be e-mailed at kchrist@avalion.com.

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