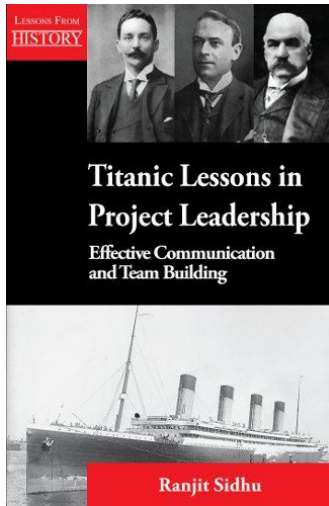


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## PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW



Book Title: ***Titanic Lessons in Project Leadership: Effective Communication in Team Building***

Author: **Ranjit Sidhu**

Publisher: **Multi-Media Publications**

List Price: US\$24.95

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Reviewer: ***Laura K. Moorhead, PhD, PMP***

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### Introduction to the Book

One hundred years ago, the passenger ship, *Titanic*, sank several hundred miles south of Newfoundland on her maiden voyage. In *Titanic Lessons in Project Leadership*, author Ranjit Sidhu posits that the tragedy was not primarily the result of a failure of engineering, but a failure of effective leadership and communication.

The *Titanic* was designed to be the most luxurious, safest, and most technologically advanced ocean liner of its day, but key decisions were made to change its design along the way that sacrificed passenger safety for a luxurious sailing experience. Sidhu draws parallels between major milestones in the design, construction, and launch of the *Titanic* and contemporary project management methods to reveal important lessons in team building and communication to ensure successful projects.

### Overview of the Book's Structure

*Titanic Lessons in Project Leadership* is organized into eleven chapters which roughly correspond to the stages and processes of project management in a traditional waterfall project. The eleven chapters are:

- Chapter 1 - Stakeholders and Strategy
- Chapter 2 - Definitions and Design
- Chapter 3 - Construction and Compromise

- Chapter 4 - Marketing and Media
- Chapter 5 - Changes and Consequences
- Chapter 6 - Teams and Tensions
- Chapter 7 - Communication and Conflict
- Chapter 8 - Risks and Reframing
- Chapter 9 - Decisions and Disaster
- Chapter 10 - Crisis and Collision
- Chapter 11 - Conclusions

The book is not meant to be a definitive history of the *Titanic* or a definitive analysis of all of the events that led up to the disaster. Instead the author identifies what she sees as key turning points and decisions that were made to illustrate how these turning points and decisions affected the final outcome. Sidhu also shows how, by using effective communication and leadership, these turning points and decisions could have been done differently.

### **Highlights: What's New in This Book?**

*Titanic Lessons in Project Leadership* is part of Multi-Media Publications' *Lessons from History Series* using catastrophic failures--such as the sinking of the *Titanic*--and spectacular successes such as the escape of the 220 captured airmen from the German prison camp, *Stalag Luft* during World War II, to glean important behaviors to avoid as well as behaviors and processes to emulate in our present day projects.

At the end of each chapter, Sidhu has a section entitled "Key points to consider for your projects" listing questions to ask about your projects that are relevant to the chapter's content. For instance, in the end of Chapter 7, "Communication and Conflict", is the question "What is the level of trust and respect among the project team?"; another is "Is everyone clear on the priorities?" Although these questions originate from the differences in power and influence between different levels of the *Titanic* crew and its officers and ship owners that affected each group's response to the disaster, the group dynamics have application for any project undertaking.

### **What I Liked**

Sidhu has a knack for getting at the crux of a problem in group dynamics and power relationships. Three examples of this are:

- (1) Because a ship's officer, who had the only keys to the lockers where the ship's binoculars were kept, was dismissed the day before the sailing, the ships' iceberg lookouts had no binoculars when the *Titanic* set sail. Sidhu points out the perceived powerlessness of the lookouts when they did not press the ships' officers for the binoculars that they needed to do their jobs and, simultaneously,

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the officers' lack of response to the lookouts request because they felt the ship was unsinkable and probably saw the lookouts roles as superfluous;

- (2) Sidhu points out the captain's reluctance to disagree with the ship owner's last-minute orders to go faster so that the *Titanic* would reach New York a day earlier than scheduled and thus gain positive publicity for future trans-Atlantic crossings, and
- (3) There was a lack of clearly defined roles and reporting in hiring the Marconi Company operators to run the ships' communications with the new technology of wireless radio--the operators reported to their company, not to the *Titanic* captain. The radio operators were paid by their company for every message sent or received *on behalf of the passengers*, so weather and iceberg warnings had no value to them and were passed along only after paid communications were sent.

These fateful decisions were made by the ship's officers with no team input and the radio operators, with no incentive to play a role in the safety of the ship, contributed to the *Titanic* attempting to push through a field of ice floes causing a catastrophic collision with the iceberg.

It's easy to draw the lessons of the need for "courageous" communication, as Sidhu puts it, even in the face of powerful pressure from influential stakeholders and to avoid top-down hierarchical team organization. Timely escalation of weather reports from the ship's radio crew and polling of all levels of the staff after the collision could possibly have avoided the loss of so many lives.

The author points out that another passenger ship, the *Niagara*, encountered the same field of ice floes that night as the *Titanic* but its captain was empowered by the ship's owners to put passenger safety above all considerations of schedule or speed. He halted the ship where it was until the next day when it was safe to proceed.

### **Shortfalls: What was Missing!**

Although the " Key points to consider for your projects" sections at the end of each chapter are thought-provoking, it would have been helpful for the author to provide suggested answers to one or two of the questions using specific events on the *Titanic* to show what could have been done better.

### **Who Might Benefit from the Book?**

It is sometimes said that catastrophes such as the sinking of the *Titanic* are not the result of one bad decision or one system failure alone, but are the result of multiple bad decisions, processes, and failures. Anyone involved in project management will benefit from the lessons summarized in this book: whether you are a project manager, a team

member, a stakeholder, or a customer. The benefit of disasters of human engineering and of failed projects is to analyze them so that we can learn what not to repeat in our own projects.

## Conclusion

*Titanic Lessons in Project Leadership* is a worthy addition to any project manager's toolbox. Its lessons can be easily digested and revisited as needed.

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## About the Reviewer



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