Willpower – The Essential Project Leadership Discipline

Michael O'Brochta, ACP, PMP
President, Zozer Inc.

Abstract

Project management is about applying common sense with uncommon discipline. Hard skills such as planning can be learned, and soft skills such as team building can be practiced; however, it is **only through the essential leadership element of willpower that either of these two basic skill sets can produce project success**. Breakthrough research now reveals that willpower can be learned and strengthened.

This is a how-to paper. It describes the essential role willpower plays in project success, presents recent groundbreaking research, indicating that **willpower can be strengthened**, and provides a list of actions a project manager can take to build their willpower. Through a dramatic story from the author's recent climb of another of the world's tallest mountains, the case is made that willpower is key to project success.

A central theme is that project managers can **speed their journey to project excellence** by focusing on the essential leadership discipline of willpower. The author, who has presented papers every year for the past decade at PMI Global Congresses, draws upon his years of experience at the CIA and elsewhere to provide his assessment of what it takes to succeed.

Introduction

The Problem

The problem is about **project success and how to achieve it**. This subject is certainly one about which much has been written. Project managers in the Information Technology industry have benefited for years from the Chaos Reports periodically published by the Standish Group. Those publications have chronicled a rather **dismal project success rate** that has hovered at about one-third; issues with user involvement and with executive support have consistently been identified as the leading causes (Levinson, 2009). Other research firms paint pictures just about as bleak: Forrester Research reports a 47% success rate, and the Economist Intelligence Unity reports a 56% success rate (Krigsman, 2012). The reasons these research firms attribute to the low success rates include unrealistic and mismatched expectations. In another set of studies, published by McKinsey Quarterly, we find strong evidence that project size matters; large projects not only fail more often, they deliver fewer results (McDonald, 2012).

My own experience during the career that I spent managing projects at the Central Intelligence Agency did not necessarily conflict with any of these reasons for projects that fail to achieve success; however, I did come to the understanding that requirements and planning were primary contributors to successful projects. In fact, my mantra became "proper prior planning prevents particularly poor performance" and "a requirement well understood is a requirement half solved." Our project life cycle even included specific tasks, milestones, and deliverables to insure adequate attention was paid to planning and requirements (O'Brochta, 2001).

When I take a step back from these various project success facts and experiences, I wonder what to make of them. I wonder why the identified **reasons for not achieving project success seem to differ**; user involvement, executive support, unrealistic and mismatched expectations, project size, planning, and requirements. I wonder about a possible relationship between these project success facts and experiences. I wonder if there is something that ties them together into a unified theory. I wonder if there is a **root cause that can help project managers avoid the pitfalls that prevent project success**.

George aspires to be a successful project manager. He has benefited from the knowledge and skills associated with earning the widely recognized Project Management Professional (PMP) certification from the Project Management Institute and earning the comprehensive Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM) from the US Office of Management and Budget. He has also benefited from considerable experience managing projects while working alongside of and for several very successful project managers who took time to mentor him.

George is at the point where he is being given increasingly important, large, and complex projects. His projects are also increasingly subject to elements outside of his direct control; organizational culture, office politics, and powerful stakeholders seem to be dominant forces. The pressure on George to deliver is enormous, as is the pressure to shorten schedule, add scope, and reduce costs. The sensation of control that George had with previous projects is rapidly evaporating. George is beginning to realize that the knowledge and skills that got him this far might not get him much further.

Exhibit 1 – A Representative Situation

Exhibit 1 contains a fictional situation where an increasingly experienced and qualified project manager is being confronted with challenging pressures. The exhibit is included to illustrate a representative type of situation where knowing the root cause can aid project managers in avoiding the pitfalls that prevent project success. In the exhibit, not only has the importance, size, and complexity of the project increased, so too has the level of outside influence. That environment can make **performing even the most basic and fundamental project tasks more difficult**. For example, consider user involvement. Under controlled conditions on a modestly sized project, the task of de-conflicting user wants and needs can be constrained in both scope and impact. However, double or triple the project size and the number of and participation level of users is likely to increase by a factor more closely aligned with a square or exponential multiplier; likewise for executive support or expectations, or any of the other identified project success factors. Exhibit 2 describes a dramatic personal situation that illustrates the same point; having the discipline to demonstrate willpower to adhere to the basics can make a critical difference. It seems to me that even the most fundamental project management concepts and techniques learned and practiced on modestly sized projects are much harder to apply on increasingly important, larger, and complex projects. So too with basic mountain climbing practices such as wind walls and storm waiting; they can be much harder to apply under difficult conditions at altitude when the summit seems within reach. What then is the key to resolving these kinds of situations?

I have managed projects for many years, and I have climbed mountains for an equally long time. I believe that these two activities dovetail in many respects. A dramatic situation took place while climbing Aconcagua that illustrates the importance of willpower. Aconcagua is the tallest mountain in South America and, in fact, the tallest mountain outside of the Himalayas. It is also a mountain that can be climbed using relatively non-technical methods; as such it attracts a wide variety of climbers. While our climbing party was camped at about 20,000 feet, the mountain was suddenly struck with a large storm for several days; temperatures were -10 degrees and winds gusted to tent destroying hurricane level speeds. We survived the storm unscathed. Others did not; seven people in other climbing parties died on the mountain in that storm.

We waited out the storm in tents, pitched behind snow walls, built to help deflect the wind. We waited knowing that by doing so we would likely deplete our food and supplies to the point of precluding a summit attempt once the storm abated. We resisted summit fever in favor of safety. In other words, we followed basic mountain climbing common sense, invariably known and understood by all on the mountain. After our climb was completed and an assessment done regarding the deaths, we came to understand that those who died made decisions to attempt the summit before the storm ended. They did not have the discipline to follow the basics they most certainly knew.

Exhibit 2 – A Personal Situation

A Definition

Now, I want to offer a definition that ties the discussion of project success to the subject of this paper – willpower. It strikes me that virtually all of the identified reasons for not achieving project success are somewhat obvious, and reflect many of the basics we first learn as beginner project managers. Keeping users involved is something I learned from day one; it is even receiving a type of institutionalization by being formally included as the Project Stakeholder Management knowledge area in the latest PMBOK® Guide (PMI, 2013). Likewise for executive support, unrealistic and mismatched expectations, project size, planning, and requirements; each and every one of these success ingredients is well known by a majority of progressing project managers. For these progressing project managers, these success ingredients as well as others they have discovered are common sense.

I believe that there is one common factor or root cause that ties these success ingredients together. That factor is willpower – having the discipline to do what is already known to work. **Project management willpower is what propels us to resist the pressure and to resist the conflicting forces**. Project management willpower is about applying the common sense we have developed with uncommon discipline.

Importance of Willpower

Alpha Study

Andy Crow published a book titled *Alpha Project Managers: What The Top 2% Know That Everyone Else Does Not*. This book depicted in Exhibit 3 captures the results of a survey of over 5,000 project managers and stakeholders and has provided an extraordinary insight into what the top two percent of project managers know and do that everyone else does not (Crow, 2006, p.13). This study focused on **identifying the best project managers**, referred to as "Alpha" project managers, and focused on determining what they did that made them the best. Opinions about these project managers were obtained from their team members, their customers, and their management. Opinions were focused on eight specific areas: attitude and belief, communication, alignment, approach and organization, focus and prioritization, issue management, relationships and conflict, and leadership. I think that the revelations of this study are the large differences between what the Alpha project managers believe and do versus the non-Alpha project managers (Crowe, 2006, p. 84-89, p. 106-107).

Exhibit 3 – Alpha

Although in this study both Alphas and non-Alphas understood equally the importance of planning, the Alphas dedicated double the amount of project time to actually doing the planning. Alphas spent on average a total of 21 percent of all project labor hours on planning. Similarly, both Alphas and non-Alphas equally understood the value of

communication; however, the Alphas were viewed by others as being much more effective at performing the actual communication; 80 percent for Alphas vs. 49 percent for non-Alphas. The communication they paid the most attention to was with their stakeholders; Alphas constantly asked others for their opinions about the project, and they responded with information tailored to their stakeholders' interests.

This study demonstrates the value of adhering to the basics. Although virtually all project managers in the study could clearly identify the importance of the basics of planning and of communication, the Alphas had the discipline to actually do them to the degree necessary. The point being made is not so much about which particular basics the Alpha project managers adhered. The point is that the **Alpha project managers do have the willpower to adhere to the basics**.

Essential Attributes

The essential attribute of willpower has been spotlighted by leading business guru Jim Collins, author of the hugely successful book *Good to Great* (Collins, 2006, p. 6). He reports that **"an absolutely iron will"** is essential in moving from good to great. And, he states that this iron will should be directed not at the ambitions of the leader but to the organizational cause – for the project. One of the most listened to modern-day project management gurus, Neal Whitten, expresses a similar view (Whitten, 2005, p. 42). "It is my experience that project managers are not willing to make the tough and unpopular project-related decisions, even though their instincts warn them that they are not taking the most effective action." He goes on to say that **project managers are too soft** since they "tend to make decisions that often are not in the best interest of the project."

In addition to business and project management gurus, PMI sponsored research has also shown a direct link between the project manager's leadership style and the success of the project, and it has shown that **success is more likely when strong willpower-related competencies are demonstrated**. In one study that involved organizations in eight countries (Turner, 2006, p. 75), the researchers showed that projects dealing with complexity and projects that caused considerable change were more likely to succeed when the project manager had strong emotional competencies related to willpower (motivation, conscientious, and resilience). In another study (Reilly, 2007, p. 15-18) project success was positively correlated to project managers that had the discipline to emphasize a transformational leadership style that focused on the inspiration and motivation of project team members even when confronted with organizational and cultural resistance.

In one of the few contemporary books that extensively addresses the subject of project leadership, persistence "to push on even when thing's don't go as planned" is highlighted as an attribute of great project leaders, so too is steadfastness "to act calmly in the face of disruption or catastrophe" (Bull, 2010, p. 123-124). The Federal Acquisition Certification for Project and Program Managers (FAC-P/PM), which is

available to US Government employees, takes the attribute of willpower several steps further by including the related competency of resilience as a requirement for certification (FAI, 2007).

There seems to be a convergence between the project leadership studies, gurus, research, and even a certification standard; willpower has been identified an essential project leadership discipline.

Willpower

Barriers

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 69.2% of adults in the United States 20 years and older are overweight or obese (CDC, 2010). Do these adults know they are overweight or obese; virtually all do. Do they know that the basic factors of diet and exercise are involved in reducing weight; virtually all do. Do they know that the Nutrition Facts label on virtually all commercially available food products contains information about the recommended nutrient values as well as the values for the particular food product; virtually all do. Can lack of information and knowledge be the underlying cause for overweight and obese adults in the Unites States; most certainly not. As illustrated in the dramatic personal mountain climbing story, as illustrated in the representative fictional project management situation about George, as illustrated in the listing of basic common reasons for not achieving project success, and as illustrated by food product labeling, lack of information is not the underlying or root cause for failure. From this I conclude, as depicted in Exhibit 4, that knowing what to do is not the same as doing it.

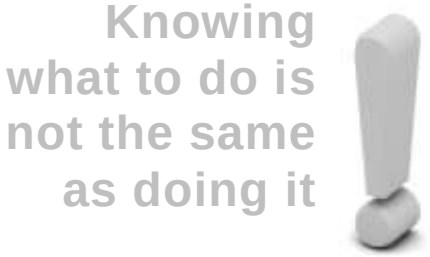

Exhibit 4 – Knowing and Doing

Apparently it is **our brain's fault** (Kluger, 2012, p. 42-47). "Pity your prefrontal cortex – the CEO and chief justice of the bedlam that is your brain. It's the prefrontal that has to reconcile the artiste of your right hemisphere with the logician of your left, the tough guy of your hypothalamus with the drama queen of your anterior cingulate cortex." Apparently, we are wired to do certain activities, such as eat when we can rather than when we need to, and we are wired to give preference to short-term pleasures over long-term sacrifices. Neuroscience use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) reveals that our brains have an "imbalance between the restraint and indulgence systems." Shall we take comfort in claiming that it is not my fault if I am overweight, or not my fault that I rush unwisely for the mountain summit, or not my fault that I failed to have the discipline to use my willpower to perform a project management basic?

Worse yet, it appears that even if we are able to exert willpower in one area, that often leads to **backsliding in other areas** (Baumeister, 2012, p. 25). Experiments have shown what happens when people followed instructions to use their willpower during the showing of a sad movie to suppress their emotions. "Either way, the effort to control their emotional reactions depleted their willpower. Faking it didn't come free." Willpower tires us out in many different ways, including "resisting food or drink, suppressing emotional responses, restraining aggressive or sexual impulses, taking exams and trying to impress someone." And, critically important for project managers is "Task persistence is also reduced." That strikes at the very heart of successful project management. Performing tasks, especially those that have been identified as basic to project success, is what project management is all about.

What limits willpower? Some have suggested that it is blood sugar that brain cells use as their main energy source and cannot do without for even a few minutes (Aamodt, 2008). "Most cognitive functions are unaffected by minor blood sugar fluctuations over the course of a day, but planning and self-control are sensitive to such small changes. Exerting self-control lowers blood sugar, which reduces the capacity for further self-control. People who drink a glass of lemonade between completing one task requiring self-control and beginning a second one perform equally well on both tasks, while people who drink sugarless diet lemonade make more errors on the second task than on the first."

Even if we took comfort in this neuroscience and blood sugar excuses in the past, new research is revealing that we can indeed take some control and seize our destiny out of the hands of the preordained.

Building and Strengthening Willpower

In the short term we can **spend our limited willpower budget wisely**. For example, if a project manager wants to be capable of drawing on his full supply of willpower for an important milestone review with key stakeholders, then he would not spend time immediately prior to the review engaged in a task he found arduous such as performing detailed financial calculations. He would save his willpower reserve for when it was most important.

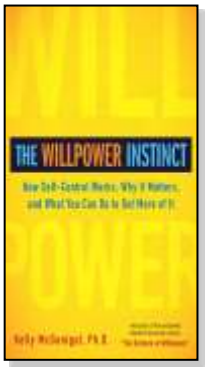

Exhibit 5 – Willpower

For the long term, breakthrough research is now showing us that **willpower can be built and strengthened** (McGonigal, 2011, p. 59). I think this represents a key to unlocking the potential so many project managers have developed as they have gained skills and knowledge. This key can be used by project managers to allow them to apply the common sense they have already developed with uncommon discipline.

As revealed in the breakthrough research captured in Exhibit 5, we find that our brains already include the willpower muscle, and it gets used every day. And like a muscle, willpower can be strengthened. Researchers are learning what kind of calisthenics it takes to get our willpower into shape. First and foremost is the **discipline of routine and habit**. In psychological studies, even something as simple as using your nondominant hand to brush your teeth for two weeks can increase willpower capacity. People who stick to an exercise program for two months report reducing their impulsive spending, junk food intake, alcohol use and smoking. They also study more, watch less television, and do more housework. Other forms of willpower training, like money-management classes, work as well. **Strengthening willpower in one area builds willpower strength in other areas**.

Even a small change to a routine, if repeated often enough, will evolve into a new habit. Since more than forty percent of the actions we perform each day are not the product of deliberate actions but of habit, we need only to develop a couple of new habits (Duhigg, 2-12, p. xvi). The **key to habit change is to keep the old cue signal that leads you to the old reward but insert a new routine in place of the old one**. "If getting home from work is usually a cue to flop onto the couch and munch chips while watching TV, put a pair of laced-up sneakers by the front door. Substitute a new routine – an early-evening run – for the old one of snacking, but keep the reward; after exercising, allow yourself to watch your favorite show. Repeat this often enough, and you will have a habit you want to keep."

During this strengthening of the willpower muscle lapsing back to the old ways can be a constant temptation; a pause-and-plan strategy can help (Segerstrom, .2012, p. 181). When temptations arise to deviate from the new habit, the urge to give in can be strong "It won't hurt to skip this one run." The mind's focus is narrowed on the temptation; this narrowing leaves few options other than to give in. However, those temptations can be circumvented with a little effort in advance. **Pausing and planning** well in advance of the temptation crisis widens the options and brings the rational prefrontal cortex more into play.

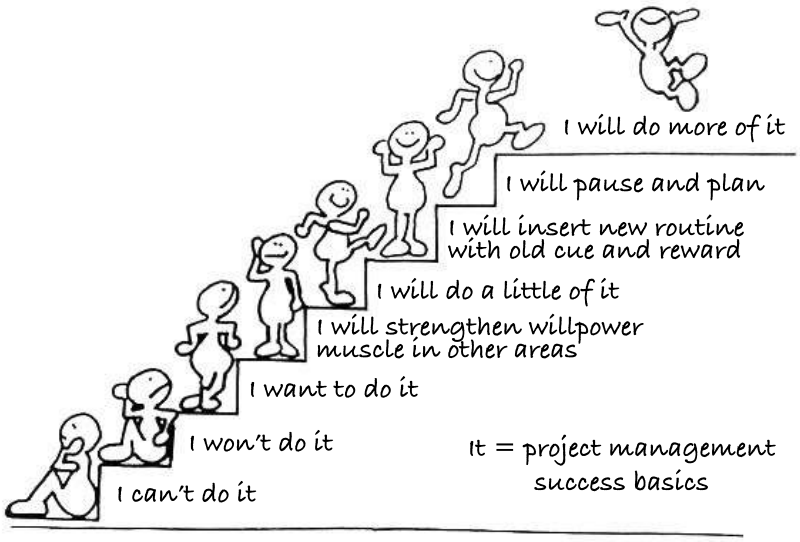

Exhibit 6 – Strengthening Willpower

Forgiveness works too. After we inevitably experience an occasional lapse, berating or shaming ourselves into getting back on course may be counterproductive. One study found that those who forgave themselves for failing at a task were more likely to brush themselves off and try again. Researchers demonstrated that dieters given a pep talk after eating a doughnut - emphasizing that one small setback would not ruin all their hard efforts - were less likely to indulge later on than doughnut eaters who didn't have the talk (Kotz, 2011). "If we want to have more willpower, we have to learn to be a **friend and mentor to ourselves**, rather than equating self-control with self-criticism.

Adding a new project management basic to your routine will, if it does not require too much extra effort, evolve into a standard behavior. Small increments accomplished over an extended period of time will produce notable increases in willpower, similar to the progression experienced by someone starting a new physical fitness program. This progression of willpower strengthening, which is depicted in Exhibit 6, can move the project manager from old habit to new.

With these habit-changing ideas in mind and with the goal of building and strengthening willpower to perform the common sense project management basics, we could consider the common causes identified for project failure and contemplate how willpower could help. Note that the list of project failure causes in Exhibit 7, although faithful to the leading research and experience, is incomplete and may not accurately reflect situations encountered by all project managers. By design, the list is representative at best; it is assumed that each project manager can pick essential items from and add to the list based on their own experiences.

Basic Causes of Project Failure	Maxim	Willpower Actions
Inadequate User Involvement	Nothing is impossible for the person who doesn't have to do it.	Understand user constraints. Invest time and energy to educate users and management about project needs and impact if not met. Develop expertise to understand user needs.
Insufficient Executive Support	It seems to be more profitable to have 50% overruns than to spend 10% more on project management.	Engage with other like-minded project managers to make a list of needed executive actions. Educate executives about needed actions. Emphasize connection between needed actions, project success, and executive success. Be sensitive to executive limitations and constraints. Help executives take needed action.

Basic Causes of Project Failure	Maxim	Willpower Actions
Mismatched Expectations	Scope cannot creep – but it can gallop.	Thoroughly document and baseline key project documentation including requirements and plan. Link actions and communications to baselined documentation. Be vigilant about informing others of the impact of each potential baseline change being considered.
Big Projects	At the heart of every large project – is a small project trying to get out	Restructure big projects into a series of related smaller projects. Deliver required functionality incrementally.
Thorough Requirements	A requirement well understood – is a requirement half solved.	Invest time and effort needed to thoroughly understand the requirements, the reasons for them, and their consequences. Document all requirements and their relationships in a hierarchy.
Incomplete Planning	Proper prior planning prevents particularly poor performance.	Plan all work. Use work packages and control accounts. Link planned work to schedule, costs, requirements, and risk. Perform only work that is planned. Manage plan changes.
Schedule Reduction	You want it bad – you will get it bad.	Link all potential schedule reductions to baselined key project documentation including requirements and plan. Adjust project scope and cost to reflect schedule changes.
Cost Reduction	What you can do with half the money – fail.	Link all potential budget reductions to baselined key project documentation including requirements and plan. Adjust project scope and schedule to reflect cost changes.

Basic Causes of Project Failure	Maxim	Willpower Actions
Flawed Communication	You may believe that you understand what you think I said – but you may not realize that what you heard is not what I meant.	Thoroughly document and baseline key project documentation including requirements and plan. Link communications to baselined documentation. Be vigilant about providing reports with content and format tailored to each stakeholder's needs.

Exhibit 7 – Willpower Actions

For example, suppose that inadequate user involvement has been identified by a project manager as one of the common causes of project failure in their organization. Furthermore, suppose that the inadequate user involvement is due primarily to circumstance; the users are overly busy with other significant responsibilities and are constrained by spending time needed on a particular project. These user constraints could be limits of their time and/or limits of their ability and/or limits on the priority of their interest. The challenge for the project manager, who knows and wants to act on the project management basics, is to gain the level and quality of use involvement when confronted with the stated constraints. The challenge for the project manager is to resist the temptation to put the user involvement situation in the "too hard" pile only to be neglected in favor of other easier to do activities. The challenge for the project manager is to exercise the willpower to dig into the specific user involvement limitation causes, to be open and candid about the project needs with users and management, to actively engage in collegial discussions aimed at finding an optimal work around, to be open to alternative approaches, and to develop the expertise to understand the user needs. The challenge may also involve having conversations focused on the negative impact to the project unless a satisfactory user involvement arrangement can be found.

Willpower can be used by the project manager over the short term to focus on a relatively achievable component of a solution, perhaps arranging for one user to attend one particularly important review. Over the long term, the project manager can strengthen his willpower by focusing on something entirely unrelated to user involvement; something easily achievable. The project manager could, for example, build his willpower muscle by exercising the discipline to say something nice to the first coworker he encounters each day. This type of willpower strengthening is relatively easy to accomplish and can be relatively enjoyable. Once the willpower muscle is strengthened with one exercise, it can be followed with a second and a third. Eventually, the project manager will have developed the level of willpower to return to the challenging task of user involvement. At that point he might cordially engage management in a discussion about his user involvement needs.

Conclusion

Project Success Correlates to Willpower

This paper makes the case that the challenge of achieving project success can be met through the essential leadership element of willpower; having the discipline to perform the project management basics that are already known to work. Project management willpower is what we draw upon to resist the conflicting forces to address the commonly reported as causes for not achieving project success. Studies, research, recognized authors, and even one project management certification, include willpower-related competencies.

Barriers exist to achieving the level of willpower necessary for project succes; our brains are wired differently, we backslide, and we are dependent on blood sugar. In the short term we can spend our limited willpower budget wisely. For the long term, breakthrough research is now showing us that willpower can be built and strengthened. Strengthening willpower in one area builds willpower strength in other areas. Changing habits to strengthen willpower involves keeping the old cue signal that leads one to the old reward but inserting a new routine in place of the old one. We can pause and plan as we resist the temptation to backslide. This is great news. Adding a new project management basic to your routine will, if it does not require too much extra effort, evolve into a standard behavior. And this will lead to increased levels of project success.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael O'Brochta, ACP, PMP

Author

Michael O'Brochta, who has managed hundreds of projects during the past thirty years, is also an experienced line manager, author, lecturer, trainer and consultant. He holds a master's degree in project management, a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, and is certified as a an ACP and a PMP. As Zozer Inc. President, he is helping organizations raise their level of project management performance. As senior project manager at the Central Intelligence Agency, he led the project management and systems engineering training and certification program to mature practices agency-wide. Mr. O'Brochta's other recent work includes leading the development of standards and courses for the new U.S. Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers. He serves at the PMI corporate level on the Ethics Member Advisory Group where he led the development of an ethical decision-making framework that was released PMI-wide, and at the chapter level where he built and led the international PMIWDC Chapter-to-Chapter program; he is a graduate of the Leadership Institute Mater Class. Mr. O'Brochta has written / presented papers at every PMI North American Global Congress during the past decade as well as at many international and regional conferences. Topics that he is currently passionate about include how to get executives to act for project success and great project managers. Since his recent climb of another of the world's seven summits, he has been exploring the relationship between project management and mountain climbing. He can be contacted at mobrochta@zozerinc.com.