

Project Stories – the Largely Untapped World of Personal Experiences & Lessons Learned in Project Management

David L. Pells

Introduction

For a majority of human history, storytelling has been the primary process for both learning and teaching, for most societies and most topics. In recent years I have gained a new appreciation for the power of personal stories in project management. Thinking back on my own career, I can remember learning the most from older, more experienced, and wiser project leaders and mentors who enlightened me with personal stories or examples from their own experiences.

Formal education is extremely important, and all project management professionals should invest significant time in classes, courses and degree programs. However, I have also recently realized that it is impossible to learn everything about project management from either one's own experience or through formal education. In addition, project managers and PM professionals must practice life-long learning, since concepts, conditions and knowledge continue to expand in this field. It is therefore necessary to learn from other people, on a continuous basis, in order to continue to grow and mature in our capabilities and expertise.

Now I am engaged in project journalism, reporting news on a daily basis from around the world of projects and project management. We cover, share and tell stories. These stories are not limited by organization, industry, geography, politics, culture or economic conditions. Projects are everywhere now, and so is project management. The challenge is to find the stories in a form that can be easily communicated and shared. It is now time for more project stories to emerge, not just stories by project leaders and project management experts, but stories from anyone and everyone working on projects.

This is the only way to truly expand our collective knowledge, perceptions and understanding of what is involved and how best to organize and manage project teams. Every project has a lot of stories. Every project involves one or more people. Everyone working on a project has a personal story, even a set of stories, about her or his contributions, role, understanding and work on the project. This article is about those project stories, where they can be found, why they are valuable, and how we can begin to tap this rich, educational and even entertaining world of personal knowledge and experience.

Where are Project Stories?

As we learn in project management 101, every project has a life cycle. That is, projects are defined as unique endeavors with a beginning and end; most projects are initiated to create a new product or service – to accomplish

something. A project also has a life cycle because it has a “life” – once a project is ‘born’, it cannot be ended without dealing with the various project startup issues such as strategies, people, budgets, customers, owners and other aspects given life during project startup. (In fact, a project’s life can become most visible during project cancellation or shut down, when so many activities must actually be stopped!)



As we also learn in basic project management courses, the project lifecycle includes a set of stages and milestones along the way. For large projects (such as those pictured above), those milestones represent significant events, often affecting many project stakeholders and, for some projects, with significant impact (on organizations, people and the environment). So the most obvious sources of stories on a project are associated with major milestones. This is true across most industries and organizations. Here are just a few possible sources of important stories on a project, with some related questions that could give rise to stories:

➤ **Project Start** – Why was the project started? Why is it important? What is the mission, or primary objectives? How long will it take and why? Who will be involved? Who are the customers? Who are the stakeholders? Does the general public have any interests? Are there any risks or dangers associated with the project? Who are the decision makers?

➤ **Project Team Formed** – Who is the project manager? Who else is on the team? What are their roles and responsibilities? What are their qualifications? Where do they live and work? Is this a local team, multinational team, virtual team? Are there any special or unique team-related issues? Is there a history of this team working together (if so, what?), or is it entirely new? Who does the team report to? How long will it be together? How is it expected to change or grow?

➤ **Project Contractors Hired** – What contracts will be awarded for the project? What is the contracting process? Are there any special conditions, requirements or qualifications for contractors? Which contracts were selected, and why? What are contractors’ histories or qualifications, and where are they based? Are there out-of-town or foreign contractors involved? What are contractors’ histories; what other projects have they completed? Who are the contractors main staff who will work on the project? What are their backgrounds and personal histories? Is there a deep supply chain? What are the supplier

risks? How will the contractors and suppliers work with the project team or owner? Have any small businesses been hired? Is there government oversight involved? Are there special legal issues? Is there a dispute associated with a contract award?

➤ **Design Options Identified** – What design options have been identified, and what are their various unique aspects? What were the specifications, and why? Why was the winning design concept selected? Who was on the design review team, and what are their backgrounds and experience? How was the winning design selected? Was it an open, public or closed process? Were any new or special issues identified during the design review process? Were there dissenting opinions about the selected design, and how were any such questions resolved? What are the primary risks associated with the selected design? How will the design affect the scope, schedule and budget for the project? Does the selected design require special or unique resources (or talents)? Was value engineering used during the design review process? If so, what were the results?

➤ **Preliminary Design Complete** – Is design 100% or only partially complete? How has the project scope changed during the design process? Was the design completed on schedule or were there delays? If delays, why? How will the final design affect the project schedule, budget or resource requirements? Does the final design affect, either positively or negatively, the business case for the project? Who approves the final design? What project stakeholders are involved? Have technical or other risks and uncertainties been resolved during design? Have any new risks or uncertainties been introduced? Was the design completed by contractors or inside staff? What is the opinion of the various designers regarding the preliminary or final design?



Is there an exotic project location?

➤ **Project Location Approved** – Where will the project end product be created, constructed or used? If a facility is involved, what issues were raised during site selection? Do neighbors or nearby property owners support the project? How big will it be? Will there be environmental concerns or ramifications? Will the building, facility or product produce taxes or other benefits for a local community or governmental entity? What other benefits may result? Will people be employed to work at the facility or in the business as a result of the project? (Will jobs be created, saved or eliminated?) Will location result in project delays, or possible delays? Will product or facility cross state boundaries, and, if so, what issues does that raise or problems create?

➤ **Prototype Testing Begins** – Whether the end product is a facility, process, service, software or system, some testing will most likely be needed. Where and how will that testing occur? Who is involved? What are their qualifications? Were they part of the design team, operations or independent experts? At what point is the customer included? What are test results? Were any problems uncovered, or did everything perform perfectly? How will the project scope, schedule and budget be affected by test results? How long did or does testing take, and what actions are involved? Do test involve personal safety or health risks (for example, testing new aircraft, automobiles, boats, food, medical treatment or medicines, rockets, sports equipment, weapons, etc.)?

➤ **Testing Successful** – Why were the tests successful? What were the results? What tests were performed? What does this mean for the design, project, organization? Can full implementation begin, or are permits or other approvals required? What risks and uncertainties were reduced, if any? How was success determined? Who signed off? What are ramifications on remaining project scope, schedule, budget or resources? Which project team members, contractors or suppliers are affected, and how? Is test success made public or an internal (confidential) business secret?



➤ **First Phase Complete** – Does completion of one phase or a subset of the project carry significance? (For example, completing an outside enclosure that might allow internal construction to be performed or systems to be installed.) Was a celebration held and, if so, who was involved? Is there any other special significance associated with this milestone? Did it prove anything? Were project risks reduced or eliminated with this milestone? Who was involved in this achievement? Were there any problems or incidents encountered to get here? Are there any financial, legal or regulatory repercussions (for example, was this a major contract milestone, with rewards or penalties at stake)?

➤ **Project Complete** – Completion of a project should be a big story for someone (or everyone!). Is the project 100% complete, or are there some important (or administrative) activities left to do? Was the end product delivered or handed over to a customer? If so, was there a completion, ribbon cutting or grand opening ceremony? If so, who was there and why? What occurred? What does project completion mean to the customer, sponsor, project manager, team members, contractors or suppliers? What impact will project completion or end product have on the organizations involved, the general public or other stakeholders? Who cares about project completion, and why? What does the end product look like? How does it perform? Who is happy, or unhappy, and why? Was there a celebration?



These are just a few examples of project milestones and some related questions that should have stories attached. Obviously, if a project is very large, it might have one or more sub-projects or subsystems, each of which would have similar milestones, questions and stories.

Who has a Project Story?

Every project involves people – owners, project manager, team members, customers, consultants and other stakeholders. In some organizations, project stakeholders include project sponsors, program managers, company executives and other employees. Every person involved on the project, and involved with each of the project topics/milestones mentioned above, has a story to tell. Here are some examples.

➤ **Project Sponsor** – Why is he or she the sponsor? When did involvement with the project begin, and why? What role does the sponsor play? How is the sponsor involved in day-to-day project work or oversight? Are there weekly, monthly or quarterly meetings? Is the sponsor also the project customer, or interface with the customer? Who does the sponsor report to about the status or progress of the project? What personal risks or stake does the sponsor have regarding success or failure of the project? What is the relationship of the sponsor to the project manager and/or project team? Why does the sponsor care about the project? What does it mean to the organization, now or in the future?

➤ **Program Manager** – How does the project fit into the overall program? Why was the project initiated, from the program manager's perspective? How were the project manager and team selected? What experience has the program manager with this type of project? How does the project create value for the organization? What is his or her involvement in day-to-day management or oversight of the project, or with review/approval of key milestones? What is his or her background, experience, education? How does the program manager work on a regular basis with the project manager or team? Where does he or she live? Is it near the project? If not, what issues does that raise?

➤ **Project Manager** – Who is the project manager? How long on the project, and how selected? Hired from inside or outside of the organization? What is her or his background, education and experience with similar projects?



What is the project manager's role, responsibilities or actions associated with each of the key milestones? How does he or she work on a daily basis, and interact with the rest of the project team? Is there stress or strife on the team? How does the PM lead, evaluate, and motivate team members? How does the PM communicate with team members, contractors, suppliers, program manager, sponsor or customers? What is his or her personal perspective or feelings about various project issues? What does he or she care most about?

➤ **Project Team Members** – Who is on the team? Where do they live and work? What is each one's role and responsibilities on the project, and related to each of the phases or milestones? Are there sub-teams and, if so, what are they for and who is involved? Are there multiple locations and, if so, what are the issues related to location and communication? What are personal backgrounds and experiences? Are there conflicts, strife or instabilities associated with individuals or sub-teams? Are there strong or weak personal relationships among team members? Is there frequent interaction? Is there special expertise? One or more layers of management or responsibility? Are some new to the organization or project, more or less experienced, younger or more mature, etc.? Are risks perceived or understood differently by team members? Do personal motivations differ? Do team members interact with customers or outside stakeholders and, if so, in what ways? Are there other team dynamics or issues that are or might affect the project?

➤ **Project Contractors** – Each major contractor will also have a project manager and project team. Who are they? What are their backgrounds, experiences and stories? What are their roles? Who are the key players, and what do they think? How do contractors on the team work together and with the project owner? Which contractors have assumed the greatest risk in their contracts? Which ones post the most risk for the overall project? Which are more or less experienced? These questions can go all the way down the supply chain, to sub-contractors and suppliers of materials, equipments and components. Each organization will have one or more people assigned to their contract or role on the project. Each one has a story.

➤ **Project Customers** – Who is the customer? Is it internal or external to the project owner's organization? If the project is to develop a major facility or product under contract, then the customer will be well known and active on the project, either on a daily basis or in an oversight role. Who is the customer's representative? How was he or she involved in proposing, developing, sponsoring or financing the project? What does he or she know about the purpose, mission, requirements or objectives for the project? What is the customer's opinion or perspective as the project is launched and progresses towards completion? Does the customer lose interest or get more excited as the completion nears? How will the customer gain value? Who has a stake in success?



The Value of Stories

So why is the subject of project stories worth thinking about? What is the value of, and what benefits could arise from, telling project stories? The most obvious value is related to transferring knowledge and educating other project team members. In my opinion, however, the benefits could be far greater. Here are just five possibilities:

1) **Reduce Project Risks** – Communication in general among project team members should help reduce risks. Personal stories might highlight project risks that may be based on strongly held personal feelings but not included in official reports or risk management plans. Personal stories told after a project, like a case study, can highlight lessons learned that might help reduce risks on another similar project. I think these factors could be very true in specific industries, for example, those involving highly technical, dangerous or complex factors. It seems to me that engineers, scientists or other specialists might learn a great deal from each other when sharing stories about project experiences.

2) **Educate Team Members** – Stories can be very powerful means for sharing information or educating other project team members, about issues, completing or managing project activities, dealing with risks or opportunities, addressing communication or relationship-related topics, or any other aspect of project life or work. This is especially true for educating younger or less experienced team members; this has given rise in recent years to the use of project mentors in organizations and as a consulting service. It can also be highly useful for educating others who simply have not had the same level of experience with a specific type, size, technology or aspect of a project. A story about a lesson learned, for example, can be very powerful when the speaker can relate emotions, hardships or rewards that he or she experienced personally. Of course, educating team members can also reduce project risks.

3) **Improve Teamwork** – Story telling should improve project teamwork, especially if respect for both story teller and listener is maintained. It seems obvious that if project team members are sharing stories about their own experiences, about similar projects or even about recent events, then both project communication and teamwork should improve. Project participants who are freely sharing information will be better informed, perhaps with information that can help their work. In theory, productivity should improve and risks subside.

4) **Motivate Team Members** – Stories can be highly motivational, especially if the lesson learned or purpose for the story related to project successes or rewards. Even stories with sorry outcomes or to describe mistakes or failures can motivate others to avoid making the same mistakes. Stories can be especially useful for describing project failures, allowing project management principles to be highlighted that might have alleviated the problems. The experience of sharing a story with others can also be motivational for the story teller, who can highlight points of his or her choosing. Why not? Even fictional stories can be useful!

5) **Increase Harmony** – Perhaps the most overlooked benefit of storytelling is that it can help create more harmony on the project team. Harmony is not often mentioned as a goal for project management, but it certainly is important to me and to those in many cultures around the world. Who needs conflict? Let's tell each other stories, develop good working relationships based on respect, and complete our projects on time, within budget, to customer requirements and with everyone happy at the end of the day.



How to Find Project Stories

Because PMForum would like to publish more project stories, we have given this topic considerable thought. As suggested above, there are millions of potential project stories around the world of project management, dozens or even hundreds on every project. Most of those stories are not being told or captured. Why not?

The reasons are threefold, in my opinion: (1) few people working on projects have time to write about or share their own stories, since most projects are intense with serious time pressures; (2) few project managers or stakeholders are encouraged to share their stories, and some may actually be restricted from sharing project information with outsiders; and (3) to a lesser extent, many people are not comfortable or experienced with either writing stories or talking about themselves.

If stories are seen as valuable, then there are some steps that can be taken to encourage, facilitate and capture project stories. Here are some suggestions.

➤ **For organizations or teams** – Start incorporating stories into team meetings and other functions. Go around the room and ask if anyone has an interesting story to tell. Perhaps it will take five or ten minutes; most listeners will either be educated or entertained, maybe both. Perhaps some points will be raised that could help the project. Or, perhaps the story teller will reveal a lack of understanding about something deemed important. Better yet, start a project story time for employees to share knowledge and experience with co-workers. Some might find it useful to publish project stories, if they are written down, and some might actually add to the organization's knowledge base. Could you imagine having stories available from the most experienced program and project managers in your organization? For some organizations, it would be tremendous. NASA already does this.

➤ **For the project management profession** – We should find more ways to capture project stories. Why not have tracks at conferences for project management stories? Why not publish more stories in magazines and journals, and on websites? We will try to do this at PMForum, but there are thousands of project stories out there. Someone needs to start collecting, publishing and

categorizing these stories. How much can we learn from each other that can help create a more complete and useful body of knowledge for the project management profession? For example, more stories about how to create and manage multi-cultural teams in various parts of the world might be very useful.

➤ **In general** – Everyone can benefit from project stories, including the general public. Projects are everywhere now, in all aspects of industry and social life. The general public needs to learn more about projects and project management. What better way than with project stories? What is a project? What occurs during the life of a project? What lives are affected and changed? These are universal questions; everyone working on a project has some answers to those questions, some personal experiences and perspectives, and, perhaps, a story to tell.

Conclusion

I love stories! As a child, I loved stories of adventure, about nature and about others like me. As a university student, some of the most interesting courses were those where guest speakers shared stories about their personal experiences in organizations or in the (real) business world. As an adult, I still love good stories, especially those with meaning, good plots and interesting characters.

It seems to me that many projects could have very interesting stories – with interesting people, locations, technologies, purposes and even lessons to be shared. Personal experiences are a vast resource that has not yet been tapped enough in the project management profession. Why not capture more stories? I think it might help us expand and refine our collective body of knowledge, help educate others who are dealing with the same issues on similar projects, and create a continuous learning environment within the project management field.

If someone works on a project for a year, then he or she probably has 10 good stories to tell about that project. If a project employs ten people, there might then be 100 stories; if 1,000 people work on a big project, that could be 10,000 project stories. How many good stories are there? With all of the fascinating projects going on now around the world, just think of the possibilities.



The Academy of Program, Project & Engineering Leadership (APPEL) at NASA has already figured this out and publishes great project stories in its monthly *ask*

the academy eMagazine and at its annual conference. It is time for the rest of us to start doing the same.

If you have an interesting project story, please send it our way.

And, no matter what your story, good luck with your projects!

David L. Pells
Managing Editor
www.pmworldjournal.net

About the Author



David L. Pells

Managing Editor, PM World Journal
Managing Director, PM World Library
Addison, Texas, USA



David L. Pells is Managing Editor of the ***PM World Journal*** (www.pmworldjournal.net), a global eJournal for program and project management, and Managing Director of the PM World Library (www.pmworldlibrary.net). David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management with more than 35 years of experience on a variety of programs and projects, including energy, engineering, construction, defense, science, transit, high technology and nuclear security, and project sizes ranging from several thousand to ten billion dollars. He has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, serving on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice. He was founder and chair of the Global Project Management Forum (1995-2000), an annual meeting of leaders of PM associations from around the world. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award, PMI's highest honor, in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK; Project Management Associates (PMA - India); and Russian Project Management Association SOVNET. From June 2006 until December 2011, he was the managing editor of the globally acclaimed PMForum.org website and the *PM World Today* eJournal. He occasionally provides high level program and project management advisory services for the US government and others. David has published widely, spoken at conferences and events worldwide, and can be contacted at editor@pmworldjournal.net.