

Standard and Heroic Project Management – impact on perceived success

By Tom Taylor

The Introduction

For some time I have been interested in and studying apparent differences between standard project management and heroic project management – and their impacts on achieving perceived success.

Does heroic project management come from heroes and heroines who are constantly being heroic and always going the extra mile – they just cannot stop themselves!?

Or is heroic project management most noticeable and appropriate when the going gets really tough (and only then); or when blame is on the horizon - or right up close; or when vital team members are not performing adequately; or difficult truths and real power need to be introduced to each other – or kept well apart?

Are standard project managers sensible people who do their required work, are appropriately qualified, who work 9 to 5, with an hour for lunch, and have up-to-date CPD records? This sounds wonderful and sensible.

Alternatively might these “standard” project managers be inhibited in being, or even considering being, heroic by their culture, or fear of failing, or lack of encouragement, or lack of reward or remuneration or recognition? Or is it all about inherent personality – so can heroic P3M be taught and learnt at all?

Is heroism one of the unstated or understated P3M competences along with: luck, wit, courage, reasoned judgement, good eyesight, selective hearing and others?

There is this story – as below. It is not clear if it is all true. It seems to be about a project manager who considers possible heroic acts to be part of a standard service. Is this a dangerous approach; or a commendable outlook? Should such an approach be avoided or suppressed, or should the outlook be encouraged and rewarded? Does it depend on the circumstances and the participants?

The Story

Sharron L'Manager is a committed project manager. She was on her way to her next routine project event with her new temporary assistant – young Projec Hardnut - in his smart school uniform. Projec was the prized offspring of her client Mr Rodney Hardnut of Hardnut Enterprises. Projec could be going places. Basically Sharron had taken on a short term change programme as well her other assignments.

For many days the weather had been very wet and very windy so all the roads, streams and rivers were very wet, swollen and in turmoil. During their journey to the next event Sharron L'Manager had only turned away for a very short while, but when she turned back, Projec Hardnut had wandered off. She suddenly noticed a small figure in the raging waters of a nearby river. Clearly they were in great difficulties. Certainly they were in great danger. And without doubt it was Mr Hardnut's prized offspring. Yes amazingly it was Projec Hardnut! In the raging river. In his school uniform. In big trouble – and of his own making.

Without a second thought Sharron L'Manager entered the foaming, swollen waters. After much effort and time, whilst being swept well down stream in the deep, dark and cold river, Sharron L'Manager found Projec Hardnut and brought him to the surface.

But that was not the end of the adventure – Oh No! And as you will hear it had many further twists and turns. But for assurance at this stage suffice to say that Projec Hardnut was fully restored, somewhat changed because of the experience- and he may go on to a long and happy existence.

In the swollen river case it was not long after its resolution that Mr Hardnut Senior met up with Sharron L'Manager, raised his hat and said, somewhat formally in an artificially deep voice, on the lines of:

“Good day Ms L'Manager I understand that you recently witnessed young Projec Hardnut in some distress - and accordingly without a second thought you entered the stormy river. You were then swept many miles downstream. However you were able to locate Projec in the deep, dark and cold waters. And you were able to bring him to the surface. Is that correct?”

“Yes sir that is correct” said Sharron L'Manager with assurance and a slight regional accent.

“I then understand that you managed to get both of you to the side of the river and with some considerable effort raised both of you onto the river bank. At this point you performed mouth-to-mouth and artificial respiration until Projec came back to life and started breathing again. Did that happen?”

“Yes sir that is also correct” replied Sharron L'Manager in confirmation.

“It is also my understanding that you then stayed on the narrow, crumbling riverbank through a long and stormy night, keeping Projec alive with your own body heat, while at the time fending off wild, aggressive animals. In the morning in misty, early day-light you climbed the high, steep, wet, crumbling, rocky cliffs whilst assisting and sometimes carrying the child. You were able to make your way through several miles of dense thicket, brambles and gorse, with occasional swamps, until you found a country road. Is this an accurate description?”

“As far as I can remember that is reasonably accurate Mr Hardnut.”

“You then flagged down a passing vehicle and engaged the occupants, who are members of the local crime syndicate, to take you both to the nearest suitable health facility. Apparently these people usually are involved with kidnapping and demanding ransoms – but on this occasion somehow they agreed to your requests to assist with the journey. Unfortunately on the way the vehicle broke down. However you were able to execute temporary electrical and mechanical repairs and the journey was ultimately completed. While at the field hospital you sought out and paid for prompt and expert medical attention to Projec. He received treatment and was kept overnight. You ensured that his mother, the school and the police were all assured of his survival and wellbeing. You arranged he had his favourite food and you personally read him a bedtime story. He has now been released and is sufficiently recovered to be playing the piano in the school concert today. He will then be taking a well-earned rest for a couple of weeks in Switzerland.”

“That is encouraging news” acknowledged Sharron L’Manger.

“I must admit to you Ms L’Manger that it has been pointed out to me, by some of my colleagues, that your performance in this episode is not dissimilar to the project management services that you are known to deliver consistently and regularly on your current commissions across our portfolio – day in, day out – but without anyone falling into swollen rivers.” he remarked.

She replied with a slight nod “We are professionals, sir. We do our best. We try to please.”

*“Indeed.” said Mr Hardnut “And during these events you were **constantly** with Projec and never ever left his side?”*

“That is correct” said Sharron L’Manger “Absolutely. Except when he wandered off of his own accord and fell in the river”.

“Indeed. But apart from that are you absolutely sure – you were present throughout?” he persisted.

“Yes absolutely” she reaffirmed.

“In that case Ms L’Manger from this conversation having verified the sequences of events and also your constant attendance - I have to ask you, can you please explain – where is it and what have you done with his school cap? It is blue, quite new, has his name inside and if it cannot be found someone will have to pay for a new one. Since he was in your charge it may be deducted from your fee. We have asked Projec about this – several times. He keeps referring to you – Ms L’Manager – constantly and positively – and on this matter also. ”

“I see. In that case I will stop what I am doing and I will investigate this unfortunate loss - immediately” Sharron L’Manager responded.

“Please do” concluded Mr Hardnut. “And please take my niece and nephew with you – Delicate and Portofino – for some work experience in such matters.”

“Certainly” replied Sharron L’Manager with a slight nod of the head with some words in a regional accent..

The Considerations

When considering the lessons that may be sought (and possibly learnt) from a case study such as this it occurs to me there are various options available:

- # Should we concentrate on seeking lessons directly from details of the episode itself or from the tone of the conversations afterwards?
- # Might such lessons be about “hard” tricks and techniques or equally about “soft” inter-personal relationships?
- # Do we sometimes focus on the petty issues and do not always take in the big picture?
- # Should we consider and identify the lessons that the participants may have learned, or at least have considered, individually, on their own, by themselves?
- # Or would it be different if the participants considered such lessons or feedback together, collectively, as a group?
- # Or what lessons might objective outsiders take from such a case study and be able to apply – when possibly working with these particular participants in the future or with others in similar positions?
- # Do such lessons sought or learned hold greater resonance if they are experienced personally?
- # Does it help to have a good imagination of what might go right, what might go wrong and the consequences of each? Or is that all about Risks Management – with threats and opportunities?

I would be interested in the opinions of others on such matters and to receive other case study anecdotes concerning standard and heroic project management.

Thank you.

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About the Author



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Tom Taylor is a global advisor on projects, programmes, enterprises and business. As it says on his large business card / small brochure (a concept still in development) he is known as:

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Tom is a central figure in the Association for Project Management (APM) currently serving as President. He is a former APM vice president, chairman, branch committee member and London branch chairman. He is a Registered Project Professional (RPP), Honorary Fellow of APM, recipient of the inaugural APM President's Medal and recipient of the prestigious Sir Monty Finneston Award. Please go to www.apm.org.uk

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