

Options for the New Project Manager or Inexperienced Project Manager

By Rebecca Winston

During my travels, speaking engagements, or even conference calls, I am asked what can the new project manager or inexperienced project manager use to help them do their work or become a better project manager. Many of the current textbooks, books, guidance documents, standards, and other manuals that are available in the marketplace are packed with information from the basic to the complex. There are few documents that contain the information in a simplified, straightforward manner without being burdened by tools, methods, or opinions. Currently, in the marketplace the only documents that are brief and succinct are the ISO documents. For the new project manager or the inexperienced project manager, the ISO 21500:2012 provides a simple road map to project management.

As with any document, it will undergo revisions and updating, but for the time being it is a simple view of the complex environment of the project world. It has applicability to most projects, most of the time in any organizations for any type of project. It allows for the tailoring that project managers should learn and implement.

Are there limitations to the document? Absolutely! However, no matter how many possibilities that one attempts to capture in any one standard, the world of project management is filled with one more exception. For a new project manager or an inexperienced manager the knowledge to be able to determine what is the best information to use found in any of the voluminous materials available is a difficult one. The use of a simplified standard allows the project manager to ask questions, invest the project management team in decision-making, and seek mentorship. If the project manager feels the text of any standard provides the answer to most, if not all situations, it is harder to seek answers from within or outside the project.

Individuals can agree or disagree about the particulars in any standard. No one standard is perfection. It is up to the project manager to use the standard to improve the management of his or her project, but not to blindly enforce the individual lines stated in any standard.

ISO 21500:2012 will undergo a revision in the next couple years, but in the meantime the document provides the roadmap for “what” a project manager should have established, provided, maintained, or by other action caused to happen within the project to provide for the framework of a potentially successful project. The standard provides concepts and for now processes. Part of the revision process may be to eliminate the processes, change the processes into text only, or move the processes into another document that may be a process standard or an implementation guide. For now, the concepts are paired with the processes. The standard also provides the project manager with simple non-industry specific definitions of the basic project management terms. The standard does not attempt to redefine terms that are adequately defined by

a dictionary, for example the term budget. Just adding “project” prior to budget does not change the term itself from the basic term as defined by the dictionary.

Another benefit of the standard is that it provides a view into the overall, generalized environment that the project exists. Thus, it allows the project manager to see how his or her actions and place in that environment fits into the larger organizational environment. This knowledge also allows the project manager to understand to some extent the world that his or her project stakeholders exist.

The good news for some new project managers and inexperienced project managers is that a couple countries have adopted or are in the process of adopting ISO 21500:2012. While some countries have not adopted or will not adopt because they do not adopt management standards [note they may certify the manner in which the standard is produced], the standard is still an international standard. Further, even if the organization has a project governance procedure on project management; or several covering one or more subject or knowledge areas such as risk, quality, procurement, or others, the use of ISO 21500:2012 can still be a useful supplement tool to break the procedures down to their elemental pieces allowing the project manager to understand how each piece of the procedure fits with any other.

In using ISO 21500:2012 a project manager should work with the understanding that no document, tool, or resource is going to be 100% on point or perfect for all situations. In using the tool the project manager should prioritize the set of resources, tools, and documents that they use with a focus on the organizational demands and contractual demands placed upon their project. After all, projects are unique.

The use of any standard or reference document should be judicious. The use cannot stand in the place of using the best management judgment of the project manager and the project management team. But having a document that is streamlined, not bound by methods, tools, or other extraneous material, but simply provides the project manager with the concepts and processes is useful, especially for the new or inexperienced project manager.

About the Author



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Rebecca (Becky) Winston, Esq., JD, PMI Fellow, is a former Chair of the board of the Project Management Institute (PMI®). An experienced expert on the subject of project management (PM) in the fields of research & development (R&D), energy, environmental restoration and national security, she is well known throughout the United States and globally as a leader in the PM professional world. Becky has over 30 years of experience in program and project management, primarily on programs funded by the US government. She is a graduate of the University of Nebraska's College of Law, Juris Doctorate (1980), in Lincoln, Nebraska and has a Bachelor's of Science (BS) degree in Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University. She is a licensed attorney in the states of Iowa and Nebraska, USA.

Active in PMI since 1993, Rebecca Winston helped pioneer PMI's Specific Interest Groups (SIGs) in the nineties, including the Project Earth and Government SIGs, and was a founder and first co-chair of the Women in Project Management SIG. She served two terms on the PMI board of directors as director at large, Secretary Treasurer, Vice Chair (for two years), and Chair (2002). She was elected a PMI Fellow in 2005. She has served as a reviewer of the Barrie Student paper for the PMI Educational Foundation for several years and will begin service on the PMI Educational Foundation Board in 2018. She is also a member of the American Bar Association and the Association of Female Executives in the United States.

Ms. Winston periodically serves as an advisor to organizations such as the National Nuclear Security Administration (USA), U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on topics ranging from Program and Project Management to project reviews, risk management and vulnerability assessments. She served on the Air Force Studies Board for six years and currently serves on the Intelligence Science Technology Engineering Group for the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine.

Since 2008 she has also served in the capacity of Chair of the US Technical Advisory Group and Head of Delegation for Technical Committee 258: Project, Programme, and Portfolio Management, as well as serving on the various Working and Study Groups drafting international guidance standards. She has extensive recent PM experience in the areas of alternative energy, national defense and security, and has worked closely with local, regional and national officials, including Congress and the Pentagon. She is also a global advisor to the PM World Journal and Library.

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