

Project Management is for those Comfortable with Uncertainty

Interview with James T. Brown ^{1,2}

Author, Expert, Speaker
President, SEBA® Solutions
Florida, USA



Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan

Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)
International Correspondent, PM World Journal

Introduction to the interviewee

James T. Brown, Ph.D., president of SEBA® Solutions Inc., has provided training and consulting services for dozens of companies nationally and internationally. James T. Brown is now also a lecturer at the University of Central Florida College of Business. He taught courses such as Business Intelligence, Data Driven Decision Making, Systems Management, etc.

James is the author of *The Handbook of Program Management* published by McGraw-Hill and has published extensively on platforms such as *PM Network*, *PE Magazine*, *PM*

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

² How to cite this interview: PMR (2022). Project Management is for Those Comfortable with Uncertainty: Interview with James T. Brown, PhD; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue I, January.

World Today, etc. As a recognized authority in project management, he is a frequently invited keynote speaker on project management and leadership. You can view a demo video of James here <https://www.sebasolutions.com/project-management-keynote-speaker/>.

James is a member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), and the National Speakers Association. He is actively seeking a public or private board appointment.

Interview

Part I The Joy of Project Management

Q1. I noticed that you graduated with a PhD degree in engineering. What motivated you to enter the project management profession?

James T. Brown (Brown): I never thought about project management as a profession initially. I was just getting stuff done and then getting stuff done through others, and that turned out to be project management. Project management was and is intriguing to me because in many aspects it is a mystery, a puzzle to be put together.

I enjoy working with the clients to gain an understanding of the requirements. This may sound trivial, but to good project managers this is a deep understanding. Some project managers don't go far enough in the understanding of the requirements. They don't understand the clients' motivations for the requirement, they can't frame the understanding in terms of business value or what the results may mean intrinsically to the client and their stakeholders.

I also enjoy the uncertainty and managing that uncertainty. Without uncertainty project management would be boring and often those that don't like it or that do it but find it stressful are not comfortable with all the uncertainties. I tell young project managers and aspiring project managers if you are uncomfortable with uncertainty, project management is not for you. One of the things that separates a good and capable project manager from one who is not is a high degree of comfort with uncertainty. Uncertainty is a mystery, a puzzle to be put together.

The working experience at NASA exposed me to some very skilled project managers and I studied their tradecraft. Most of project management was not about process but was about leadership.

Part II Scope Management

Q2. Defining the requirements (scope) is important, but in innovative projects the clients themselves are sometimes not clear about what they want exactly. What should project managers do in this case?

Brown: First, everyone has to accept the risk that in an innovation project there will be dead ends and wrong turns. It is not logical to think you are going to have an innovation project that will go as smoothly as a normal project. So, expectation management with all stakeholders is key at the beginning. There is no magic bullet or magic methodology for this, as they all have disadvantages. Regardless of the methodology, I like to understand what is not clear and assess its significance in comparison to the overall project scope and objectives. I also like to understand when it must be clear and when it doesn't matter if it is clear or not. This requires a good deal of risk analysis and multiple plans based on multiple assumptions. I do not like to work ahead of requirements and I do not like to be more detailed in planning than the requirements or the project parameters allow.

So when I say "multiple plans" these are not detailed plans but higher level courses of action. In my opinion, it is critical for innovation projects to make decisions quickly when something is not working. Too many times I see hesitation or delay or endless meetings and a decision takes longer than it should. This not only delays the project but damages morale. Setting the structure for quick decision making is part of the expectation management process with stakeholders at the start, and parallel with this is not blaming anyone. The attitude should be, "That didn't work and let's move on." The project manager has to lead the team with this positive attitude, or the team will default to a negative attitude with all its associated negative consequences.

Part III Managing Stakeholder Expectations

Q3. What are your tips on managing stakeholder expectations, especially when expectations of different stakeholders are in conflict? Faced with changes, how should PMs gain the support of stakeholders?

Brown: I must have continual strong relationships with stakeholders and understand their perspectives, goals and power. Also, I have to throw out the notion that I have to make them feel like a winner, because in large projects some are going to lose and I am often the one that has to bring them to that realization. I can't bring them to this realization if they do not believe I understand their requirements. So convincing them I understand their requirements from their perspective is paramount.

Once I have that done, I make sure all stakeholders know the requirements of all other stakeholders and these are ranked in order of importance including allocated and estimated budgets for each. This requirements/stakeholder map is the basis for conflict resolution. In general, it is something I create while meeting with stakeholders independently and I am strategic about how it is used but it is the basis for conflict resolution. I try to do most of this behind the scenes, so that by the time there has to be a public meeting with stakeholders, most issues are resolved or there are few conflicts. In short, what matters is pre-work, pre-work, pre-work. Some of this pre-work is planning but the majority of it is trust building.

When the stakeholder trusts you, they will most likely follow your advice or recommended

course of action. Trust must be created and if you have a tight timeline for a project, you also have an even tighter timeline for creating trust.

Part IV Risk Management

Q4. In the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) era, what do you think is the right attitude towards risk for project professionals?

Brown: I think nothing has really changed about a successful project professional's attitude with regard to risk. Regardless of what labels are used or how things are categorized, you had better know what the risks are by thorough risk identification. The risks should then be prioritized in order of importance and decisions should be made about how they would be handled.

These planned decisions should be partnered with and accepted by stakeholders ahead of time to assure no surprises. Acceptance by stakeholders provides the opportunity for quick execution of mitigation or response plans without unnecessary meetings or bureaucracy. "Prioritized" also means risks are numbered in priority order and I communicate with stakeholders which risks will be managed and which will not. There is never enough time or money to manage all risks and the stakeholders should be made aware of which risks are actually being managed.

Fundamentally risk management is not complex, but it can be hard in the dynamic project environment. If a poor job is done initially, the project slips into a responding mode instead of a managing mode when it comes to risk. When I teach "Risk Management", I start with "Risk Identification", which is the foundation of the risk management process. When I am with a client, I may ask to see their risk list. What is often provided is a very small number of risks and these risks are not properly characterized.

A properly characterized risk should state not just a cost impact, but a schedule impact, a scope impact, a political impact and any other impact that matters. By "political impact" I mean how it impacts the project organizationally from a reputation point of view, either internally or externally. You have to identify these risk impacts up front so the risks can be prioritized. This is often not done because it seems like a lot of work. It is only too much work when the risk is managed improperly. Initially you just want very rough guesstimates on these, then you strategically determine where you want detail and you add this detail incrementally as required.

Project managers are more likely, as directed by PMOs, to require too much initial detail and accuracy. Detail Kills! A project manager should deploy detail strategically. I never want anyone on my team to do things to a level of detail that is not required. Project managers usually focus on getting things done and I think equal focus needs to be put on releasing people from unnecessary work by making sure what they are doing is only adding value and that value is needed in the near term.

So as a leader I need to assess what can be taken off their plate that doesn't add value. I know it may seem like I have drifted from the risk discussion, and I have, but I there are

too many instances where people say they don't have time to do adequate risk management and they waste a lot of time on useless tasks, reports or detail. This is compounded exponentially when they have meetings about these things.

Part V Leading without Authority

Q5. You've written an article titled "Leverage Human Behavior to Lead Without Authority". Would you please talk about how to lead without authority?

Brown: I grow weary of hearing project managers whine and complain about not having authority. In any complex project with multiple stakeholders, no one will have the kind of authority to make things happen by command. You make things happen by leveraging the authority of others, not just one high-level person, but many people that may be involved in the project.

Effective project management is not about some automated tools that efficiently send notices and due dates out. If it was, anyone could do it. It requires communication and communication is more than telling and notifying. Effective project management communication is creating an understanding of a situation to a degree that people comprehend from a perspective that causes them to take action. Leaders and stakeholders are not unintelligent. When someone complains that leaders don't make the right decisions, that means the leaders don't understand the situation as they understand it, and that they have not communicated effectively.

You must take leaders and stakeholders to pain. You have to make them suffer or see suffering to get them to act. This means I have to paint a clear picture of the consequences and let them see, make them accountable, for their actions or inactions that result in those consequences. I craft any and all communication with stakeholders strategically. This means I take the truth and data and wrap them with psychology so it has the most impact. If a project manager is just sharing the facts without psychology, well you can't expect people to act just on the cold hard facts.

Two books I recommend with regard to this are "How to Get People to Do Stuff" and "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion". It is imperative that we not only have but excel at crafting our communication with these psychological principles to leverage the authority of others. Additionally, understanding the sales process is another tool that enables you to obtain the commitment of others. The bottom line here is that communication is very calculated; it is not haphazard. It is part of an overall strategy and can be a multi-step process.

Part VI Program Management

Q6. What should we pay special attention to in program management? Based on your observations, what are the common mistakes in program management?

Brown: Special attention has to be given to the long term. For example, train project managers so they are more capable of handling more projects and more complex

programs. This means having a plan for mentoring and a plan for training and a plan for project assignments that enable this growth. It is expected and normal for the project manager to be consumed with the day-to-day work to make project delivery happen. However, the program manager has to be consumed with the long-term development of the program and this includes training stronger project managers.

There are two common mistakes. First, not providing enough resources for the projects to succeed or not scaling back the program to meet the resources available. This simple act of underfunding or having unachievable due dates is the root cause of most of all the other problems in a program and its projects. The program manager has to make hard tradeoffs among resources and suffer the chastisement of customers and stakeholders who may not get everything they want, but they are challenged to protect the program. Too many project managers are stuck trying to deliver something for nothing in an impossible time frame.

The reason I wrote a book on program management and not project management is that most project failure is caused at the program level and not at the project level. The program manager is responsible for assuring an adequate budget and putting the project manager in a position to be successful. This means the program manager should be willing to fight for adequate resources or a reduction in scope to assure success. Some program managers simply pass on unachievable targets to project managers, becoming part of the opposition instead of an advocate for the project manager.

A program manager must be comfortable with not making people happy because all stakeholders usually want more than they have resources to pay for. This means a program manager should be trusted, respected and not necessarily liked. Unfortunately, too many companies have a culture where the schedule is a lie, the budget is a lie and the truth only shows up when milestones are missed and costs are overrun, which is a sure sign of poor or a lack of programmatic leadership. The project manager may get blamed but they are rarely the root cause.

Second, getting into too much detail on project issues while correspondingly not fostering and developing stakeholder relationships.

Part VII Leading with feel

Q7. You've emphasized that we shouldn't focus too much on terminology, tools, or processes. What does it mean? What do you mean by "leading with feel"?

Brown: Project management is fundamentally about leadership. Terminology, tools and processes should result from leadership, and it is not one size fits all or one type fits all. Good leadership and critical thinking would and will automatically create this.

People try to make project management too mechanical when it is something that is best done with feel. Leading with feel means I keep up with the critical aspects of the project but also randomly get into some details of the project. People must know you will occasionally get into the details or they will hide problems from you.

I inherited a mantra from a leader and it was, “Events of great consequences often arise from trifling circumstances.” This means that it is often a little thing that brings the project to a screeching halt. Leading without feel means I just look at status reports and PowerPoint decks. Leading without feel means I just pay attention to the output of the project management tool. Leading with feel means I call people about lower-level tasks. Leading with feel says I will randomly show up and say show me how this works, tell me what your biggest obstacle is, etc. Leading with feel means I may ask for a briefing or walkthrough on some seemingly unimportant aspect of the project. Leading with feel means I am approachable by everyone. You can’t fix a problem you are unaware of and leading with feel is also about creating a culture where people are comfortable in bringing you problems before they become unfixable.

I am not shortchanging project management process or discipline here, as discipline is paramount and the leader must assure it. But it is not right to think the project management discipline is about filling out all the forms and checking all the boxes when it is really about assuring that we do the right thing, the common sense thing. We establish what is right by thinking about our project and the context of the circumstances that surround it.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit
<http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



Yu Yanjuan

Beijing, China



Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjuanyu-76b280151/>