

## Why Chaos Is Such a Great Source of Motivation <sup>1</sup>

Tara Miller

As a seasoned project manager, I thrive on chaos. The joke in my family is that if I get bored, everyone is in trouble because I'm going to start a home renovation project, bring home a puppy, or even start a company. When things get calm, I tend to create a whirlwind of new activity.

I know that might sound counterintuitive (for someone whose job is to create order) or even reckless, but I'd argue that chaos is where greatness, innovation, and magic happen if you can push through the discomfort. You often see the best in humans come out when they're forced to push their limits. For me, the alternative to chaos is complacency.

The best project managers acknowledge that the world is inherently chaotic and apply their project management tools in a way that provides structure to the chaos while leaving room for flexibility and creativity. This balance is known as the "edge of chaos." It's a sweet spot where you have enough structure to guide your team and manage your resources, but enough flexibility to pivot when necessary and adapt to changing circumstances.

Chaos gives me, as a project manager, confidence and motivation. My favorite part of a project is when no one else can see the way through, but I'm already starting to see the pieces come together. I know how my project management tools will help create order from chaos: the project plan and vision, the team charter and ways of working, and the contingency plans.

And in fact, some of my proudest accomplishments have stemmed from periods of pure chaos. After having my third child, I came back from maternity leave and decided this would be a good time to co-found my own strategic project management firm. (I told you I love chaos.) Starting a company from scratch is inherently chaotic—even more so when you're trying to handle the demands of a new baby and two other children under 5. There are so many unknowns, so many risks—especially as compared to the stability of a job you have 15 years of experience doing. But this also offered an opportunity to create

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something new and on my own terms, so I took the leap, treating the process like any other project with project plans and stakeholder management plans. While we now have our foundational components in place and are aligned on where we're going, there are still days when my schedule is thrown off before I've even woken up, so the chaos never goes away.

Another example of leaning into chaos was taking on a client with the question of "how do we accelerate innovation?" That's a broad, wicked question to throw at someone because it has so many nodes to it. When you think of pulling on one node, there are usually 10 others that go with it. Once we started to pull apart the question and clarify what we were driving toward and what was in and out of scope, we were able to form a plan, establish benchmarks, define the current state maturity, and begin to experiment to a future state. I've since helped multiple clients implement innovation incubators to tackle a variety of creative business ideas. These incubators are a good example of how chaos can be beautiful. People think of innovation as this pie-in-the-sky thing where you can walk outside, spend time in nature, and come up with great ideas. But there's actually a structured way to do innovation that allows it to thrive.

This type of chaos also extends to my personal life, too. My husband has come home to find walls taken out of the house (by me). That then led to a complete house renovation. And when we were done with the renovation, we actually decided to sell the house. (Go figure!) I often think about why chaos and being unsettled are strangely motivational for me. And I believe some people run to chaos because they are looking for purpose. But for me I believe that in chaos I see and live my purpose.

So what are the lessons for others? For project managers, it's important to let go of your ego. It can sometimes feel painful to abandon a perfectly crafted plan or do a feedback session mid-project, but being willing to do this may be the difference between success and failure. Use your project management skill set and tools to guide you through change and chaos and provide the right level of structure and comfort for your team, but don't be blind to moments of magic and inspiration.

For leaders who are hiring project managers, remember that you can't answer a difficult question without working through chaos. Big challenges don't come with easy answers. Don't be afraid to hire someone who has a different perspective or different experiences. You want someone who is comfortable with ambiguity and can navigate chaos with confidence and creativity.

And next time you are in a moment of chaos, take a minute to watch people at their peak performance. Appreciate the magic. It's in these unsettled times that the best in us shines through. If you, too, thrive in chaos, I'd love to hear more about how that plays out in your life.

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## About the Author



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**Tara Miller** is co-founder and partner of Artemis Factor, a women-led management-consultant business that has scaled in four years to over 50 consultants serving 15+ pharma/biotech companies. Tara has a reputation for building sustainable operations from the ground up, and instilling discipline and structure in ambiguous and chaotic project environments. As a portfolio, program and project-management practitioner, Tara over the course of her career has delivered more than 40 transformational projects, including at least 10 product launches and 7 innovation incubators. Tara can be contacted at [tara.miller@artemisfactor.com](mailto:tara.miller@artemisfactor.com). To learn more, visit <https://artemisfactor.com/>