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Interview with Maltzman and Stewart
by Ipek Sahra Ozguler
Interview

Interview with

Rich Maltzman and Jim Stewart[1]

Authors of *Great Meetings Build Great Teams: A Guide for Project Leaders and Agilists*

Rich Maltzman, PMP, (pictured on left) has coauthored several books on project leadership, including Bridging the PM Competency Gap, and the Cleland-award winning Green Project Management. He teaches a suite of courses in project leadership, serving as a Master Lecturer at Boston University.

Jim Stewart, PMP, (pictured on right) has facilitated dozens of project meetings, from kickoffs to planning meetings to Scrum events. As an independent project consultant and Agile coach, he advises on best practices, teaches project management, and strategizes and executes on Agile transformations.

Interviewed by Ipek Sahra Ozguler

International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Istanbul, Turkey

Interview

Ipek Sahra Ozguler (Ozguler): *Could you please give a brief information about your last book, titled "Great Meetings Build Great Teams: A Guide for Project Leaders and Agilists"?*

Rich Maltzman (Maltzman): We know that project leaders run (and suffer through) many meetings and many kinds of meetings. Our effort went into the science of, and practical tips for, making those meetings more productive, fun, and effective, with people

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having more confidence in the project and the project leader when they leave the room.

Jim Stewart (Stewart): It's a book that provides project managers with an understanding of why meetings fail and provides them with the tools to improve them. It also talks about the science behind meetings and focuses on team building and working virtually.

Ozguler: *What are the key benefits of the book for Project Leaders and Agilists?*

Maltzman: Of course, we expect the main benefit to be that a reader will gain tips, skills, and techniques to improve their meetings and therefore their projects and project results. But another benefit is that we put extra effort into making the book fun and interesting to read.

Stewart: Considering that both traditional project leaders and agilists run many meetings, the main benefits firstly are in understanding why meetings go poorly and then in learning how to take charge.

Ozguler: *What str your opinions about the status of projects today? Why are meetings so important?*

Maltzman: I have strong opinions about the need for project managers to step up and be project leaders, which means truly owning the project with a wider perspective of why it exists in the first place, and what benefits and value it delivers long after the project itself is forgotten. Meetings done well provide project leaders with a key platform to make that happen.

Stewart: Unfortunately, the rate of project failure has not improved over time. That is not entirely attributable to poor meetings. However, we contend that meetings are important because that is where stakeholders and the team can get together and make decisions. Poorly run meetings prevent a meeting of the minds and can ultimately demoralize the team.

Ozguler: *You stated that "there is a science behind the design of good meetings". Please elaborate this statement.*

Maltzman: We leaned on the research of Dr. Steven Rogelberg's "The Surprising Science of Meetings", including the need to be mindful of meeting duration and size, and the fact that even African Wild Dogs have meetings. Look it up! There is also this gem: the person who most often says a meeting is a success is the person who talks the most, usually the person leading the meeting. Structure your agenda to promote a high level of engagement.

Stewart: For just one example, studies have shown that back-to-back meetings create a higher level of stress in the attendees. Having this occur on a daily basis can lead to poor meetings and even worse decision-making.

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Ozguler: *Could you please explain the relationship between poor meetings and project problem root causes?*

Maltzman: One of the largest connections between poor meetings and project issues is subtle but supremely important: if you cannot plan and execute a meeting, which (especially a kickoff meeting) is a project, you lose something very important right away: credibility, authority, respect, from your project team and other key stakeholders. They will legitimately ask: *"if this person cannot even run a meeting, how will they run this project?".*

Stewart: I think Rich stated this well. I would add that if you cannot get through your agenda on a regular basis, then you are missing an opportunity to plan and make decisions.

Ozguler: *What are the key meeting rules? Please share the details of the term "The Zen of Facilitation".*

Maltzman: These are less rules than they are tips, guidelines, and best practices. Below, Jim has covered most of them. But the key best practice is to create an environment of psychological safety where participants' great ideas – and darkest warnings – get heard and appreciated. Also: know your Meeting Goblins! For that, you have to read the book.

Stewart: Have an agenda, control the meeting, and shut down non-productive conversation while still being respectful. Have action items with names and dates and then follow up. The title "The Zen of Facilitation" actually started as a joke. But then we realized there was something zen-like about being in a certain zone while facilitating. But not to be taken too seriously.

Ozguler: *How does a project manager overcome challenges in managing conflict?*

Maltzman: We refer to - and trust - the time-tested principles of *Getting to Yes*, and two of their main principles: "Separate the people from the problem", and "focus on interests, not positions". There's much more about this in both books.

Stewart: There are several models for managing conflict. One of them is the Thomas-Kilmann model which talks about levels of conflict and provides strategies for managing – if not entirely resolving – conflict. It is important to note that conflict is to be expected on a project and, unless it is wholly detrimental, should be considered a normal outgrowth of people working together.

Ozguler: *Please explain the term "goblins". How do you deal with Meeting Goblins?*

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Maltzman: For this, both of us recommend that you listen to a fun podcast which focuses on this specifically: https://pmhappyhour.libsyn.com/092-goblins-in-the-room-managing-meeting-misbehaviors-with-rich-maltzman. There is an entire chapter in the book featuring characters like Guo the Garrulous, and Tina the Tangent Taker.

Stewart: There is no one "right way" to deal with meeting goblins. On the (relatively) easier side, you have the people who tend to be distractors. With some practice you can get good at preventing them from letting the project go astray. But when you have what we call Billy the Bully, the challenge is tougher. You need to find a way to minimize his impact or even remove him from the meeting.

Ozguler: *How do improving traditional PM meetings and Agile events improve continuous team building?*

Maltzman: Since team building is done best in real-time and (hopefully) in-person, a meeting is an ideal point in space and time to build the team. Don't underestimate the power of a kick-off meeting, and don't forget that connections and relationships between your project team are at least as important as the context and content of your meeting. With a solid foundation of a team that 'knows a bit about each other', you move forward to tackle project problems as a team, not a group of individuals – guided by you: the excellent project team builder.

Stewart: Rich has covered it well. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that actual exercises that are mean to build the team have their place. Get offsite, go to an escape room, have some fun. Get to know each other as people not just Joe in accounting.

Ozguler: *Thank you for sharing such valuable information with us.*

Maltzman & Stewart: Thanks for the opportunity, Ipek, we hope that this will be valuable for your readers and that it will prevent the emergence of Meeting Goblins in their projects!

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About the Interviewer

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Ipek Sahra Ozguler graduated from the Istanbul University, Turkey with a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Engineering and from Middle East Technical University, Turkey with an MSc degree in Software Management. As a project manager, she has more than 13 years of experience in various areas such as portfolio management, program management, project management, software management, business analysis. She became a certified PMP in 2012 and a certified SCRUM Master in 2014.

She has gained broader insights in a variety of projects across manufacturing, defence, FMCG (Cola Cola), insurance (Euler Hermes), audit (Deloitte), telecommunication, aviation and finance sectors. In addition, she has been working as an international correspondent for the PM World Journal since 2014.

Ipek is the creator and editor of the highly acclaimed book, The Perspective of Women Project Management Professionals, interviews with leading female PM experts and professionals around the world. The book was published in March 2020 and is available here.

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