

The Lazy Project Manager

Productive Laziness



PROFESSIONAL PROFILE



Peter is a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in Project Management.

His background is in project management across three major business areas over the last 26 years, MRP/ERP systems with various software houses and culminating in his current role with Infor, Business Intelligence (BI) with Cognos, and product lifecycle management (PLM) with Siemens. He has spent the last 7 years leading PMOs and developing project managers and is now focusing on project based services development with Infor.

He is also an accomplished communicator and leader and is a professional speaker as well as the author of '**The Lazy Project Manager**' (Infinite Ideas) and '**Leading Successful PMOs**' (Gower).

More information can be found at www.thelazyprojectmanager.com – and through his free podcasts in iTunes.

'Progress isn't made by early risers. It's made by lazy men trying to find easier ways to do something.' Robert Heinlein (1907 - 1988)



Virtual team building for project success

What's different about running project teams remotely?

Long ago, [Bruce Tuckman defined the stages of teams as "storming, forming and norming"](#) (and now "mourning" as well as project teams disband quickly and move on to other projects and other teams). Virtual teams get past the "forming" stage pretty quickly, as teams always have. Resources are identified and roles defined.

It starts getting tricky just after that.

The "storming" phase is important in preparing the team for working together, resolving character imbalances, sorting out territorial issues and generally getting everyone to know everyone else. Now without a face-to-face session (or two ... or three) this will be very challenging, and so you have to compensate somehow. During this time decisions don't come easily within the group, and team members will no doubt vie for position as they attempt to establish themselves in relation to other team members. Clarity of purpose increases, but plenty of uncertainties will persist. Typically cliques and factions form, and there may be power struggles. The team needs to be focused on its goals to avoid becoming distracted by relationships and emotional issues. Compromises may well be required to enable real progress.

So what? How does this change the role of the manager?

In a virtual situation a lot of these issues can be hidden, so as the leader you almost have to force the matter. It's also very easy to jump to a wrong conclusion about a fellow team member, apply stereotypical attributes, and miss tensions hidden by a reduced communication process and lack of physical visibility as to how people are behaving.

If at all possible, make the investment in a "hothouse" face to face meeting. By this I mean an intensive, almost 24/7 5-day team experience. Use an external facilitator to drive the storming process harder and faster to a conclusion. Make the business case that this is an investment, no matter how significant, that will pay off.

And by 24/7 I mean not just work but social activities as well, dinners with the team members, activities that bring people together and that are fun and visits to local sights and events.

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At dinners why not let the team organise the evening plans, what food do they enjoy, where is best to go, logistics of travel – don't organise everything for them, let them work together and learn in simple ways.

Based in the individual's personal ambitions and likes you can bond the group by agreeing goals for each team member that the group can follow, maybe to lose a little weight, or train for a sporting event, or visit somewhere special, or write an article for a magazine – it doesn't matter what it is just that the team have some insight in to each others lives.

If this is financially impossible, then you may just have to accept that the “storming” phase will be longer than usual.

What is your role once things are up and running: the time period that should require less of your time as manager?

Once you hit “norming,” the challenges decrease to a degree, but you have to be able to maintain the team spirit. At this time there should be agreement and consensus amongst the team members.

Their roles and responsibilities should be clear and accepted with the larger decisions made by group agreement and you as the leader should facilitate and enable all of this.

Commitment and unity should be strong. This is also a time when the team may engage in fun and social activities perhaps based in the challenges that you agreed during the face to face meeting earlier on.

So what do you do when you can't just head off to the pub for a beer or two?

One technique I have used is the “It's Friday” email exchange. On a Friday, it is encouraged that all those funnies, Dilbert cartoons, YouTube videos and so on are shared amongst the team. Be careful though – err on the side of caution of what is funny to whom; culture, sex and beliefs can vary a huge amount in a team.

Another technique is to explore what you don't know about the team members. Each week on the team calls, get one or two to share hobbies or something unusual that they do outside of work hours. Making new connections with common hobbies help bond a team.

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And finally, rotate the team calls. Don't take the lead each time yourself, hand it over to a team member to take 20 minutes or so to share what they have personally been doing in the past week, there is nothing worse than a conference call that is just a one way piece of communication and you wonder if anyone is actually listening. By allowing the team members to 'own' the call and to regularly lead the call then their interest and interaction should increase significantly.

And then on to "performing" — when the team is more strategically aware and knows clearly why it is doing through a shared vision. It is able to stand on its own feet with no interference or participation from the leader. There is a focus on over-achieving goals, and the team makes most of the decisions against criteria agreed with the leader.

Make it to this stage and the challenges of remote working will have pretty much disappeared or the team will resolve the issues themselves and you will wonder what all the fuss was at the beginning.

And it's not all over yet

And at the very end, when the fat lady has sung?

Tuckman's fifth stage "adjourning" refers to the break-up of the group, a point in time when hopefully the project is completed successfully. Everyone can move on to new things feeling good about what's been achieved.

From an organizational perspective, recognition of and sensitivity to people's vulnerabilities in Tuckman's fifth stage is helpful, particularly if members of the group have been closely bonded and feel a sense of insecurity or threat from this change.

Well you do need to deal with the 'mourning' aspect and perhaps a way of doing this is by keeping in touch with the team as they move on to new challenges and move through this new period of change. Social media is a great way to do this and allows for a close network of support amongst the team as they progress onwards; and who knows, you may all meet up sometime in the future on another new project. Certainly the lessons learned in successfully working with a virtual team should be carried by the virtual team members on to their next projects.

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