

4PM.com Members: Use this article from our ProjectPedia to augment your lecture and textbook reading. Ask your personal instructor any questions and then apply it to your case study and live meetings/presentations.

## Achievements vs. Activities



**By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA**

**Summary: There are two options for managing a project. The easier choice is to manage with activities; like a "to do" list. The harder way is to manage with measured achievements which describe business value. The second way is always better and it's the key to consistent project success.**

We make a clear distinction between activities and achievements. Activities are "to dos" like "teach the payroll training class"; achievements are the desired end result like, "after class 85% of the attendees can enter 30 changes per hour." PMs who can drive projects from an achievement perspective have some notable advantages over those who use an activity perspective. Before listing these advantages let's make sure the differences between managing with activities and with achievements are clear.

### **Example #1: Assignment to a Teenager**

Activity: "Clean up your room or else!"

Achievement: "Put all those Pepsi cans and all the chip packages in the garbage."

With the first assignment, all we've done is tell the child to perform an activity: cleaning up the room. Odds are that the work will not live up to our standards when the child reports the task as finished because many interpretations are possible. It's even possible, though highly unlikely, for the child to do too much work, exceeding our standards.

The key flaw in an activity assignment is that we do not create a clear performance expectation. As a result, we cannot gain commitment to the assignment nor can we reasonably dole out consequences for good or bad performance. Aside from some vague expectations about what a "clean room" is, there is no performance standard to measure against. If, on the other hand, we assign the child the achievement (cleaned so there are no empty cans or chip bags), we have the potential for better performance. We have made the performance expectation clear and have an opportunity to develop some commitment to it. Last, if we find empty cans everyone will agree that the standard has

---

4PM.com Members: Use this article from our ProjectPedia to augment your lecture and textbook reading. Ask your personal instructor any questions and then apply it to your case study and live meetings/presentations.

not been met. As a result, rewards and punishments, , have a much better chance of being perceived as fair because the standard was clear.

## **Example #2: Assignment to a Project Team Member**

Activity: "Develop recommendations to reduce turnover."

Achievement: "Secure Management Committee approval of policy changes that will cut turnover 10%."

With the activity assignment, the PM takes on the burden of checking the work at each step to guide the effort because the project team member doing this work has no guidance on the achievement the PM wants at the end. It's also possible the PM does not really know what to achieve. Thus, the team member doesn't know whether to develop 200 recommendations to eliminate all turnover or just a few to bring it down a little. We wind up playing the "Did we get the right answer?" game, where the team member does some work and then brings the recommendations to the PM and asks, "Is this what you wanted?" Usually, the answer to this question is no. The bad PM blames the person who did the work, saying, "You didn't understand." Then the PM sends them back to the drawing board.

The achievement-based assignment solves these problems. The project team member knows what's expected and we do not have to play games. We have a better opportunity to gain commitment and positive or negative consequences can be made clear. We also create a situation where the team member can derive some intrinsic satisfaction from the job.

So why do PMs and other managers assign activities rather than achievements? The answer is it's much easier and safer than assigning achievements for three reasons. First, by assigning activities the PM does not have to commit to exactly what he or she wants (there is wiggle room). Second, it is impossible for the PM to make a mistake when assigning activities, only the person doing the work can be wrong. This last issue is particularly devastating because the PM does not insulate the person doing the work from changing political winds. Weak PMs always use activity assignments because it's safe for them and always leaves them wiggle room.

Our achievement-based assignment technique is a key to our Achievement- driven Project Methodology. It pays important dividends in managing projects to their successful ends. When we assign a project team member an achievement, we have a much easier time of clarifying expectations, gaining commitment and fairly doling out rewards or consequences based on performance.

**4PM.com**

Project  
Management  
800-942-4323

# The Finest Project Management Learning: Personal Instruction in the Best Practices

[Certification](#)   [Courses](#)   [Company Programs](#)   [Best Practices](#)

---

4PM.com Members: Use this article from our ProjectPedia to augment your lecture and textbook reading. Ask your personal instructor any questions and then apply it to your case study and live meetings/presentations.

## Summary

All the techniques in this article are part of our [individual training courses](#) over the Internet as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).