

"Micromanage? Never! But How Will Everything Get Done?"



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Micromanagement is the dominant style used by project managers even though it does not yield the best results or even provide tight control.

So you've gotten the scope approved and it has a clear link to verifiable business outcomes in the user's or client's business. They've signed off on the charter too and you're ready to develop the work breakdown structure and craft the assignments for every member of the project team.

You've already made that team building speech and told everyone how you "trust them to do their part" and you "recognize that they know more about their assignments than you do."

But then that little voice of PM paranoia says, "This is a really important project to the company and to your career so you better make sure that nothing falls between the cracks. Remember, there are people on this project team who couldn't care less about the project's success. This project is no more important to them than the other five to which they are assigned. You better think of everything because a lot of them won't bother."

"Heck, a Project Plan is Nothing But a 'To Do' List"

You work late into the night, writing down everything you can think of that has to be done in this

ID	Task Name	Duration
3	Training Program	19.19 days
4	Develop training curriculum	3 days
5	Develop daily lesson plan	1 day
6	Develop slides and overheads	1 day
7	Develop test of competency	4 hrs
8	Decide on the class size	0.25 hrs
9	Review plan with user manager	0.5 hrs
10	Make changes	1 day
11	Schedule the training room	0.25 hrs
12	Test training room network	2 hrs
13	Get people signed up for class times	4 hrs
14	Send reminders to make sure they attend class	1 hr
15	Arrange for refreshments and lunch	1 hr
16	Teach the class	3 days
17	Follow-up on those who don't show up for their class	1 hr
18	Make sure people stay for the whole class	0.5 hrs
19	Give everyone the test	0.5 hrs
20	Make those who fail attend another class	0.25 days
21	Schedule the training room	1 day
22	Test training room network	1 day
23	Get people signed up for class times	1 day
24	Send reminders to make sure they attend class	1 day
25	No refreshments or lunch lunch for remedial class	1 day
26	Teach the remedial class	3 days
27	Report results	0.5 hrs

project. The work breakdown structure is a monster and as the first hint of dawn appears on the horizon you lean back, satisfied that you really have thought of everything. You review one section of the work breakdown structure (WBS) that addresses the training requirement in the project. After scanning it you lean back, pleased. Nothing will slip through the cracks on this project.

"To Do" Downsides

"To Do" lists like this one may be good personal reminders of what you have to do. The "To Do" list approach may even work on a small project where you and one or two other people have to get a laundry list of things done. But as the project team gets a little bit bigger, more cross-functional and complex, the "To Do"

list approach runs into a few problems.

First, unless you suffer from delusions of grandeur, you quickly find out that on larger, cross-functional efforts you can't think of everything that has to be done. Shockingly, there really are project team members who actually know more about their tasks than you do. They may even be able to think of better ways to do their jobs than you can. If you recognize these facts you may review the "To Do" list with each of them, using a participative style and let them create their own "To Do" list for inclusion in your WBS.

Still, you are managing activities like "write training class curriculum," "teach training class," "administer exam" with 1-3 hour durations. You may go to the trainer's cubicle at 10:46 AM to check if task#4 is complete. But what you want to manage is the outcome of the training. Who is responsible for that? The trainer? Not likely. All the trainer feels accountable for is completing the "To Do" list. With that accountability, will the trainer be seeking out ways to do it better and faster? No and the trainer may even be thinking, "Fine, you want to treat me like a dope; I'll work like a dope and do exactly what you've listed." And if the training requirement is not met, what do we hear from the trainer? "I did what you told me to do."

In some organizations, the downward spiral of micromanagement on projects is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bad project performance due to micromanagement encourages even tighter micromanagement the next time around.

The second problem with micromanagement is that things change as the work progresses and some, or even all, of our "To Do" items may be rendered impractical or unnecessary. This leads to another little problem with "To Do" lists. Keeping them current is a very time consuming chore; so time-consuming that you may not keep up. Then you have the all too typical situation of a monstrous project plan that is irrelevant three weeks into the project and a PM who is flying blind. To keep the monster updated you continually have to get status information on each "To Do" list item so you know when it's done or if it's not done. This not only places a heavy burden on your project team but also requires a tremendous amount of project manager time. In fact, you may hear questions like, "Do you want me to do my tasks or keep the "To Do" list updated?" Another bad alternative to hopping from cubicle to cubicle is having project team status meetings where everyone gets to listen to the mind-numbing updating of everybody else's "To Do" list. Every time the sponsor asks a progress question, you need to convene a project team meeting and spend hours trying to find out exactly what's going on and if you have problems.

We Decide What We Want Before Work Starts

The "To Do" list commits neither the project manager nor the trainer to a business outcome. If the training is unsuccessful and the user or client is displeased, the project manager and the trainer can blame each other. Poorly conceived work assignments are a wonderful breeding ground for the blame game.

Let's take a look at a different approach; a work breakdown structure where the project manager is crafting and assigning measured business achievements rather than a "To Do" list of activities. Conceiving measured achievements is not easy. The project manager has to decide what business outcome the trainer should produce. Then the PM needs to conceive a verifiable measurement for that business outcome. This exceedingly difficult process is the heart of our Achievement-driven Project Methodology (AdPM™). While difficult to master, the approach pays significant dividends.

ID	Task Name	Duration
30	80% of users can find a customer's order status in <15 seconds	19 days
31	User manager approves training curriculum and competency test	7 days
32	90% of users attend training class	5 days
33	Retrain users who fail until 90% is reached	7 days

On this much smaller WBS section, we've crafted verifiable measures for three assignments that lead to a summary achievement.

Note that we're not telling the trainer what to do or how to do it. Instead we're communicating what we want the trainer to achieve. We meet with the trainer and discuss the feasibility of the achievements and negotiate the work or duration estimate that the achievement entails. The PM has done a lot of thinking to come up with these measured achievements and reaps some significant benefits.

First, when the trainer commits to these ends results, the accountability is clear and there is no ambiguity about the outcome or how it will be measured. The PM is taking a bit of a risk by telling the trainer exactly what the project needs but taking that risk also ends the blame game. If the trainer delivers the specified achievement but the training does not meet the project's needs, then the failure is the project manager's fault not the trainer's. Project managers who take the risk of telling people exactly what they want enjoy project teams who are not worried about being blindsided with blame. They can pursue their assigned success with the confidence that comes from knowing what is expected before they start work.

Second, we'll also substantially reduced the size of the WBS which makes status reporting, keeping the plan current and progress reporting to the user or client much easier. With this approach a project manager can keep the project plan current with just a few minutes of effort each week. We'll also save time because our project team members already know what's expected of them, which frees them to use their creativity, knowledge and innovation to achieve the desired result. Rather than having a sullen crew doing what they're told, we may have a project team that is more actively engaged in reaching their individual achievements.

But How About the Nincompoops?

You may be thinking that micromanagement is bad for some of the team but you do get stuck with known poor performers and people who feel that your tasks rank 27th on their priority list. Don't you need to micromanage them? The answer is that the work breakdown structure does not need to be consistent in terms of the size of the assignments. There may be people who need one or two day duration assignments. But there are others who actually perform better when we give them bigger two week assignments.

Let's go back to the purpose of a work breakdown structure. The work breakdown structure is not a listing of every little micro-task that has to be done in the project. The work breakdown structure is a listing of the assignments we're going to hold people accountable for delivering. Rather than assembling an endless "To Do" list, we carefully craft accountabilities for project team members that are appropriate to their capabilities and skills. Then we negotiate with them about the work or duration commitment for the delivery of the accountability.

Tailoring Assignments for Each Person

Even with our achievement-driven approach, we still need to consider the capabilities of individuals. Consider the achievements on row 31 immediately above. That 7-day assignment might be too big for a brand new trainer. If so, we can subdivide that one achievement into two

smaller sub achievements which will give us a greater opportunity to give the new trainer feedback. On the other hand, if we give this assignment to an experienced professional who has a good relationship with the user managers and a track record that demonstrates high personal standards for productivity and quality, we could make the assignment even bigger. We might eliminate the sub achievements on rows 31-33 and assign the achievement on row #30; thus limiting our weekly tracking to just that one achievement.

Customizing the plan in consideration of the team members' capabilities also frees a project manager to spend time where it's needed. Additionally, it provides more experienced members of the project team with a justifiable amount of independence and freedom to practice their profession. The motivational impact of this assignment style should not be underestimated.

Summary

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