



[Print](#)
[Close](#)

Notes From A Stress Fest

Kimberly Wiefling

July 10, 2008

A veteran project management consultant shares some hard lessons learned from a challenging international engagement, including the importance of identifying the real decisionmakers early on, and the danger of assuming every project sponsor is willing and able.

Project Yourself is an ongoing series that invites project professionals to share practical advice, personal insights and pet peeves based on their experiences in the field. Anonymity, if desired, is assured. To submit an article for consideration, contact the [editor](#).

I just finished the toughest consulting engagement of my life. It was one of those experiences that you look back on and say, "Gosh, I learned a lot!" — which is code for "That was painful as hell!"

Rewind about two years. We had won a global engagement after a year of excruciating meetings, nit-picky proposal revision and seemingly endless negotiations. We celebrated. But now the challenge was to deliver! Over the next 12 months we worked intensely with nearly 20 senior leaders drawn from four continents. These were business managers with substantial regional responsibilities in a huge multinational Japanese corporation. Because participants were dispersed throughout the world, we bunched our face-to-face work into six action-packed weeks of workshops and several breakthrough projects scattered throughout the year. These projects tackled enormous business challenges, all of which had been festering for a decade or more — and every one of them was secretly considered intractable, if not impossible, even to some of the executives who dreamed up the projects. In the gaps between each workshop, there was a blizzard of planning, project work, preparation and status reports, not to mention the totally fruitless anxiety, worry and internal strife generated by this kind of global stress fest.

Enduring, and ultimately succeeding, in a tough project has always taught me more than gliding effortlessly to success in an easy project. This one was the former. An excessive quantity of sake should eliminate the most agonizing memories, but before I indulge, let me share a few things that my team and I learned in between savoring the soba, sushi and seaweed of the Land of the Rising Sun. As I share these lessons learned, a common theme emerges from the voice in my head: "You shoulda known better!" Shoulda, shoulda, shoulda — I feel "should" upon! Of the dozens of "shoulds" that are swirling through my brain, here are the top three lessons that I hope never to learn the hard way again.

1. We should have found out who *really* hired us.

I still don't know! Even though we were meeting with Human Resources (HR) people to set priorities, clarify goals and make detailed plans for our project, it soon became clear that they were not the decisionmakers. Perhaps we were distracted because the HR people said something like, "We're a world famous company, and we'd like to hire you to do this really cool project for many weeks over the next year, paying you oodles of money, to help our people become global leaders."

I began to suspect that something was amiss when the same person who was telling us this was also setting up the chairs in the meeting room, hanging flipchart paper on the wall, and taking out the trash at night. Another clue was their inability to respond to any questions about the program's business purpose or measurable success criteria without a week or two delay — in retrospect they were obviously consulting the real decisionmakers. The person pulling the levers could have been the Wizard of Oz for all I know, or some other mysterious man behind some flimsy curtain. There were a few prime suspects, but my best guess is that the person who originally hired us transferred to another department, leaving the rest of the organization to figure out how to make best use of the torrent of organizational change that our team unleashed on them. "All for one and one for all," I shouted. Our team and the HR gang clung together and staggered onward toward our goals.

In spite of my most tenacious efforts, HR insisted that our three primary goals were all equally important, so I did what any scrappy project manager would do — I guessed. Then we repeated these invented priorities at every opportunity, with every stakeholder, so that only a totally comatose person could have been oblivious to them. For a while we steadfastly navigated by them, making good progress towards what we suspected was the most important goal. But, halfway through the project we had a somber meeting with "the person most likely to have made the decision to hire us," where we were given a hard reset — the #3 priority had become the #1 priority. (To be fair, this was the

first time that this company had conducted such a program and, like many project “customers,” they were discovering what they *really* wanted as things progressed.) As flexible as a Cirque du Soleil gymnast, we veered strongly in the new direction for the rest of the engagement.

2. We should have made sure the project sponsors were willing sponsors.

The most senior executives of the company chose the breakthrough projects that were tackled. “Terrific,” I thought, “at least we can be sure that we will be working on challenges that the top dogs really care about.” What actually happened, however, is what usually happens when I ask executives how to dramatically improve their business. The sales division tells me how product development needs to change. Product development bemoans the ills of manufacturing, which rolls its eyes and gestures helplessly towards R&D. The head office blames the regions, and the regions react with bewilderment to the strategies and tactics of the head office. It’s always “the others.”

Every unit can easily spot ways for the other units to substantially improve business results. And, unfortunately, this is how some of the breakthrough projects were chosen. A brainstormed list of impossible breakthroughs made its way to the CEO, who decided which ones were most worthy. The executive who suggested the idea was not necessarily the same executive who was the lucky beneficiary of this yearlong campaign to improve his area of responsibility. Let the politically volatile, territorially defensive, status- and ego-protecting games begin! The executive whose area was deemed to need help was then assigned as the project sponsor — kind of like being put in charge of planning your own funeral. Which brings me to my third lesson learned...

3. We should have insisted that we coach the project sponsors on their role.

In retrospect, the executive sponsors of these projects didn’t have a clue of what it meant to be a project sponsor, and desperately needed to be coached on how to carry out their duties. But, quite frankly, I was hesitant to suggest that these extremely accomplished senior executive vice presidents needed this kind of help. A pox upon me for being cowed by position and title! By deferring to the numerous intermediaries between these execs and our team, we allowed ourselves to be lulled into the belief that they knew what to do, and we stayed out of their interactions with the teams. After all, by the time someone has 30 or more years of experience in the corporate world, and is at the helm of an organization of thousands of people responsible for billions of dollars a year in revenue, we figured that they ought to know how to sponsor a project. Well, it just ain’t so.

One sponsor lobbed grenades into the team bunker just hours before their final presentation, another publicly declared his lack of support for his team’s findings in front of the entire executive team, and another dismissed his team’s ground-breaking work as a validation of well-known information already contained in their strategic plan. The worst thing is that this was unfair to the teams, who worked slavishly on these projects for a year only to be hung out to dry like this. One saintly executive did make the climb from “good to great” sponsor by learning along the way, and that was some comfort as we dug our way out of the rubble left by the others.

But, of course, we should have seen this coming. As mentioned above, some of the sponsors were hostages to “skeleton-in-the-closet” projects that they would rather not have had going on at all. Even if they knew what to do, it was just asking too much for them to heartily encourage and support the very people who were rummaging through their dirty laundry and waving it in front of their boss, CEO.

Done Twice, Done Right

I’m sure there are plenty of readers out there smiling smugly and congratulating themselves that they would never fall into such predictable and avoidable traps. We should have seen this coming. We should have prevented it. And we should never fall into these predictable and avoidable traps again. But before you knock the wind out of yourself patting your back, keep in mind what happens to human beings under stress. The first time we encounter a new stressful challenge all of the blood rushes to our arms and legs where it is useful for hitting, kicking and running, leaving damn little behind to nourish the brain. As has been pointed out in many a psychology book, we face new stressful situations with little difference than a chimpanzee. But, with experience, some of us humans manage to figure out



how to handle these situations with our wits about us. I feel certain that next time we'll be able to avoid these familiar quagmires, and even, perhaps, qualified to lead guided tours!



Kimberly Wiefling, M.S., is the author of Scrapy Project Management and a global business leadership consultant for Wiefling Consulting.

Previously in the **Project Yourself** series: "[The Other PM](#)" (August 2006); "[Faster, Better, Cheaper](#)" (December 2006); "[In Agile We Trust](#)" (November 2007); "[Terminal Velocity in Toronto](#)" (November 2007) and "[Let's Interactive](#)" (February 2008).

Copyright © 2011 projects@work All rights reserved.

The URL for this article is:
<http://www.projectsatwork.com/article.cfm?ID=243622>