Intelligent Disobedience: The Difference Between Good and Great Project Managers

~ By Robert McGannon

The job of a project manager (PM) is often described as managing the triple constraint: scope, resources and schedule. In reality, this represents the goal of the PM. The PM must manage the production of the defined deliverables (scope), while being mindful of both the cost as well as caring for and feeding the people working on the project (resources). These must all be done within project timeframes (schedule).

However, the presence of risk, business concerns, technical issues, individual perceptions and priorities present frequent obstacles to the PM, who is pursuing success as measured by the triple constraint. Many of these obstacles can be overcome with diligence and communication, which usually comes naturally to those in the PM role. In some instances, however, these obstacles are formidable and can involve:

- Proposing unpopular options/opinions
- Standing up to senior management
- Crafting compelling arguments/justifications to garner business support
- "Bending" rules and processes when appropriate
- Applying non-traditional techniques to create "unexpected" impressions as a means to change stakeholder perceptions
- Using communication and influence skills to protect the organisation from itself

Performing these challenging tasks is what separates great PMs from average PMs. So what do the great PMs do to succeed at this formidable list of tasks? Great PMs utilise “intelligent disobedience.”

What Intelligent Disobedience is Not

Engaging in intelligent disobedience does not mean that PMs become flaming-haired, bulging-eyed radicals. It certainly is not an excuse to tell half-truths, withhold information or intentionally break corporate rules without communication to management. Nor is intelligent disobedience counter to the principles of the Project Management Institute (PMI). In fact, intelligent disobedience supports the principles promoted by PMI, especially in the areas of risk, human resource management and ethics. This will be discussed in more detail later in this article.
What is Intelligent Disobedience?

Intelligent disobedience does mean being different - with specific purposes. PMs should not behave counter to processes, or ruffle feathers without a specific intent and goal for doing so. When effectively applied, however, acting or behaving differently than is expected can yield significant results. Intelligent disobedience involves using skills pivotal to guide and other assistance dogs. All dogs must go through training prior to being certified as assistance dogs and only those with intelligent disobedience capabilities pass muster and become certified. It is the dogs that know when to disobey their masters, such as refusing to cross the street when a car is coming, that succeed in becoming guide dogs. Can you imagine a guide dog that didn’t possess intelligent disobedience, venturing into the street because its master commanded him to do so, despite the oncoming car?

Can you imagine a PM diligently pressing forward with a project or a development approach that he knew would fail or be contradictory to organisational objectives? Although the guide dog story has a more fearful outcome, the project manager’s pressing forward toward failure occurs with far too great a frequency.

For PMs, intelligent disobedience is knowing when and how to depart from the norm in opinions, cultural standards and processes. Intelligent disobedience means understanding the politics of an organisation and manoeuvring around the land mines that can diminish the project and its value to the organisation. Intelligent disobedience means having strong beliefs in the project objectives and the sponsoring organisation. It means taking the leadership responsibilities of a PM very seriously. It means having courage and fortitude and being determined to do right for your team, yourself and the organisation. Intelligent disobedience is tough. It also is vital to ensuring the alignment of projects with organisational objectives, especially in today’s business climate.

Why Use Intelligent Disobedience?

In T+D Magazine, Patricia A. McLagan (2003) says, “If you want to shut down an organisation, the best way is for people to stop working. The second best way is for everyone to just follow the rules” (p.55). This theory has been proven many times. For example, there have been instances where police officers protest by enforcing every law fully, resulting in huge numbers of arrests for jaywalking and other offences and effectively shutting down the town.

The presence of standard processes does help in creating consistency across the organisation and aids in effective communication. However, standard processes aren’t perfect. The processes’ authors do not have the capability of predicting future conditions with perfect clarity. This will have a bearing on the usability of the process as the environment changes. Conditions will inevitably arise where standard processes, common sense and principle do not converge. These are just the type of instances when the PM must invoke intelligent disobedience and divert from standard process.

Warren Buffett, the highly successful financier, was discussing his role as an independent director in the March 22, 2003 issue of Business Week magazine when he said, “Too often, I was silent when management made proposals that I judged to be counter to the interests of shareholders…collegiality trumped independence” (Prasso, p. 14). Clearly, Mr. Buffett wasn’t engaging in intelligent disobedience and believes he should have been. PMs who reflect on past experiences and realise they should have engaged in intelligent disobedience should know they are in good company!
When to Apply Intelligent Disobedience

Intelligent disobedience, as just discussed, should be applied in specific situations with specific intent and a specific result in mind. Examples of pivotal instances where intelligent disobedience might be appropriate include:

- Dealing with unresponsive sponsors or key customers
- Managing culture clashes that inhibit project progress
- Needing to shake-up lagging teams
- Overcoming resistance to changing processes
- Challenging time versus quality decisions
- Considering intuitive versus fact-based decision making

Techniques for applying intelligent disobedience in each of these situations will vary from environment to environment and will depend on the relationships that exist between the PM, stakeholders and the project sponsors. The PM's own personal style should be taken into account, as well.

Supporting PMI Principles

Certainly, engaging in intelligent disobedience involves some degree of risk. The PM must correctly read the political climate amongst stakeholders, understand the limits of the corporate culture and quickly develop trust based relationships. Misreading any of these while engaging in the "different" behaviours and approaches discussed here can be less than successful. However, holding back and not sharing what you know - or strongly believe - to be true presents greater risk taking on your part, and could inappropriately introduce or prolong risk to your project. Examples of this are:

- Proposing a new alternative that challenges the status quo
- Choosing to take a risk when you consider it worthwhile for the business as a whole
- Taking over a troubled project and demanding expanded authority within the organisation
- Saying "no" when your experience and knowledge suggest the proposed approach will fail
- Deciding you need to kill a "pet" project as a proactive alternative to failure

A cursory examination of intelligent disobedience might lead one to believe that the approach is counter to business ethics. Engaged properly with appropriate communication, this could not be further from the truth. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ethics as “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.” This means that the PM should:

- Readily share bad news
- Readily accept bad news, and do so gracefully - and possibly reward those who shared the bad news
- Recognise that the best way to be nice is not to be nice:
  - Point out shortcomings directly
  - Present your perspective and convey your experience through constructive criticism
Venturing into Intelligent Disobedience

Intelligent disobedience requires taking risks, creativity, flexibility and perseverance. We need to engage in conversations with stakeholders that are often difficult - conversations that often cause us to lose sleep at night. Many avoid these conversations or "sugar coat" them in an effort to preserve the current relationship with stakeholders. According to Susan Scott (2002), the author of Fierce Conversations, what many of us don't fully realise is "the conversation IS the relationship". If we are having "padded" or careful conversations with our stakeholders, than the nature of our relationship with stakeholders will never be fully truthful and our probability for success diminishes.

Take a risk and consider executing intelligent disobedience as you approach difficult project situations. The results can be well worth it: engaged project teams, loyal team members and a reputation for "telling it like it is" and focusing on what is right for the customer and the business at large.

References


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