

Just Do It!

By Geof Lory PMP

When my daughters were in second and third grade, parents were invited to a class Poetry & Punch event a couple times a year. At Poetry & Punch, each student read their literary creation in front of about 40-50 classmates and parents. After the presentations, cookies and punch were served. In a micro-business way, I guess you could call it a product launch of sorts.

Most of the students successfully delivered their presentations without much difficulty. As I watched each nervous child present their masterpiece, and each equally nervous parent beam with joy, I thought what a wonderful job the teacher, Mrs. Kelly, had done managing this project. The entire event was well planned, from the seating and refreshments, to the timing of each presentation. But what impressed me the most was that every student produced a story or poem of similar quality. Different subjects, different characters, different story lines, but all equal length and complexity, and each delivered within the assigned specifications.

I wondered how Mrs. Kelly got 20+ undisciplined grade-schoolers to accomplish this task. She must have been reading my mind (another quality of a great project manager), because during Punch, Mrs. Kelly explained the process she had the kids follow. Posted on the wall, while not exactly a Gantt chart but pretty close, was a 10-step process for writing a story. Having a process like this is nothing new, but what she said next was particularly interesting. Since the project was a 10-step process, every day, over the two-week period, each student was expected to deliver a piece of the project. By doing the project one step at a time, no student was ever more than one day behind schedule.

It also meant no surprises for this seasoned project manager. I liked that, no surprises. And in case you think Mrs. Kelly's schedule didn't allow for the inevitable surprises, Poetry & Punch was always held on a Tuesday. Monday was reserved for helping those few who still needed to finish their presentations. This timetable allowed Mrs. Kelly to masterfully weave risk management and contingency into her plan.

As I thought about her requirement for each student to produce something every day, I thought about how I had written papers in high school and college. Because no incremental deadlines were given, little was done on my papers until the night before they were due. Sometimes I even begged my professors for an extension, which was just an excuse to procrastinate longer. The result of my choices: stay up all night to write.

I know I wasn't alone in this habit, since most of my classmates who were at the bars with me just before project deadlines could also be heard typing late into the night. My only saving grace was that everyone was scrambling to finish like me, and so by comparison, my results were not too bad. I even remember taking

pride in being able to crank out 25 pages eight hours before it was due. Obviously, “pulling an all-nighter” was more important than what I produced.

If all of this reminds you of familiar behavior on your projects, you are not alone. These deadline-driven habits are unfortunately; characteristic of many of us, and it will take a lot of Mrs. Kelleys to try to change that. Planning has started to work for my girls. I am pleasantly surprised that when I ask them where they’re at on a school project, they can quickly recap the completed steps and can show me tangible outcomes of their progress. Impressive disciplines for teenagers.

So why can’t we all behave like this on our projects? Why the inevitable last minute flurry that leaves us spent and regretting our last minute start? Two things: lengthy time estimates and ill-defined deliverables. In other words, we allow a lot of time to accomplish the task and don’t focus on what is delivered. The conversation goes something like this:

PM: “How long will it take you to design the system?”

Developer: “Two months.”

PM: “OK”

Meeting adjourned.

Not only is two months an unacceptable timeframe without a deliverable, chances are each party has a different understanding of what the deliverable will look like at completion. Even if the design is completed within the estimated time, it is likely the deliverable will have to go through some iterative process of meeting expectations. Had the task been broken down into weekly or daily deliverables, expectations could have been progressively aligned and the guarantee of success more certain.

All of this leads me back to Mrs. Kelly and her expectation of delivering something every day. Every day you go without deliverables on a project, you run the risk of not making progress, or worse, not knowing where you really stand on the project schedule.

A good rule of thumb? “Lory’s Law of Slippage.” This law states: **A project will slip by the length of time of the longest task on the schedule.** And by slip, I mean it will fall behind without you knowing it. Mrs. Kelly understood this. She had only one day to recover if kids were late with their assignments, so she didn’t have a single task with a defined deliverable longer than one day. This always gave her time to recover, and allowed her to know exactly, within a day, where every student was on their project.

So, when you get pushback on project estimates, shorten them and require that something be delivered every day. You will sleep easier, and your team will thank you for it.

Thank you, Mrs. Kelly.

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