



Daniel O'Neil

Conversations about Managing Great Projects
and Rebuilding Haiti

7 Steps to Starting a Great Project

Advice to a newly appointed Project Director

How to start your project off right; build the team that you need, ensure that all will end well. Follow these steps to execute a remarkable project and you will ensure that your next project will come looking for you.

Congratulations on your new assignment!

Whether this is your first stint as a project director or if you have done it many times, this is an exciting moment. We are glad to have hired you. You have a chance to make a significant difference in this new endeavor. If this is a brand new project, then you are facing the challenge of coloring in a blank slate. If this is an ongoing project, then you have the opportunity to push it in new directions.

I believe the project director to be the most important role in an organization. It is up to you to make everything happen. You have to pull the team together, work out a strategy, manage the resources, and succeed. It is tough to manage all of the different expectations, allocate resources where they have the greatest impact, and consistently push your team towards its goal. You are where the rubber meets the road. This is why I believe that being a Project Director is one of the most rewarding roles in the world.

We have hired you to run our project, but we expect you to do more than to keep the project on track, write reports, and balance the project's checkbook (although you must do these three perfectly!). We selected you because we need someone exceptional to make our work remarkable. To get you off on the right foot, I suggest that you start by focusing on the following challenges:

1. Get to know your team and learn to trust them.

Unless this is a very small project, your success or failure depends on your team. Make them successful and you will be successful. Give them the resources and support to do their jobs - don't do their jobs for them. Provide them with the leadership, management, and supervision they need while also providing them with the necessary training, equipment and moral support - then let them do their jobs while being there to support them. The type of leadership a team needs changes as the team and/or the task matures. It is sort of like teaching someone to ride a bike, you have to help a lot at the beginning and then less and less as they get more adjusted and acclimated to the task. The first year is the hardest as you slowly build your team and your systems. But the time that you invest in building your team

in the beginning will pay big dividends further down the line.

Protect your team from needless distractions and interference. You need to handle the whims of donors and HQ and let the team focus on getting the project done right. Show your team that you have their back and will defend them when the need arises.

It is really important to not only lead the team in identifying your core values early on, but also to reinforce these values by reminding people about them frequently. This can be done by revisiting the core values for 10-15 minutes at quarterly meetings, identifying how they have been adhered to (or not) and where they have been of value. Hire people that have the same values and ensure that you and your team live by them.

Team is most important. Every component of the team is important and it all has to work together. If you are able to achieve this then there will be no stopping you. If any component is not working, alter it until it does.

2. Become the expert that we and our donor think you are.

You were probably hired based on your technical expertise and are therefore an "expert." But I'll bet that, although your expertise applies to this project, there are gaps. Study the project documents, contracts, and any bidding documents as if they were sacred texts with clues to eternal life. You want to figure out both what the donor originally wanted and what we planned on doing. Before you can propose any deviations from the planned strategy, you need to understand what was planned.

Then read anything you can find about both the country where you will be working and other projects in the area. One of your key roles as project director will be to explain the local situation to outsiders. You need to be an expert on it.

Thirdly, seek out the local experts and pump them for advice while taking exhaustive notes. Don't worry about appearing ignorant. For many years I was one of the experts on the Haitian-Dominican border. I always enjoyed playing the role of senior advisor when someone new came to town. Your goal is to move up the learning curve as quickly as you can. Besides, this group of experts is likely to

be your peer working group. Doing them the favor of asking their advice is a great way to break the ice.

3. Get to know your donor and your organization.

Whether you are funded by a foreign government, multilateral, or the host government, you need to get to know them and how they work. If you only talk with them when you have a problem, you will be viewed as a source of problems. Make time to visit them when things are going well and you don't need anything. Attend the cocktail parties and receptions - these are the grease that allows the gears of collaboration to turn smoothly.

You need to earn your donor and host government's trust, identify what they will see as problems early on, and work with them to solve problems or develop alternative solutions. You need to fully understand how to negotiate not only project-direct relationships with counterparts and local partners, but also the power and decision dynamics inside the donor's organization. You want to be able to hold open, honest, and frequent conversations with your hosts so that they view you as a member of their team—that you succeed or fail together. Like it or not, your relationship with your donor will be one of the most important determinants of whether or not your project will be viewed as a success or a failure. If something in your

project is irritating your client, fix it, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you.

The same is true of your organization. Figure out what we want from the project. Is this a for-profit, one-shot project where the goal is to squeeze the maximum profit? Is this project seen as a pilot where extra time and resources need to be invested to allow for greater returns later? Does your organization have sacred cows i.e. things that just have to be done even if they don't make sense? Better to learn these issues up front to avoid heading down dead-end alleys later.

You are the liaison between your team, your donor, and HQ. Managing the relationships with the donors and HQ are just as important as managing those with your team.

4. Get to know the people that you are helping.

Get out to the field and meet the people who will be impacted by your work. Drink tea with the local doctors who will benefit from your project. Walk the fields with the farmers who will be participating in your workshops. Even if you are required to hold formal launch workshops, create time for one-on-one interactions. You need to hear their stories so that you can understand firsthand what their concerns are, but also so that you can repeat them. Even

when I have had a hundred people working under me, 90% of the stories that I repeat came from my field visits rather than from my staff.

Who else is doing the same kind of work? Are your approaches complimentary or contradictory? Can you bring other organizations together to build synergy or alliances? Even if the work of the other organizations is not a clear match to what you are doing, perhaps you share problems that you can solve together.

5. Begin with the end in mind.

The best time to plan how to close the project is when you are first starting up. You need to know what must be in place and documented at the end of the project and then work out the systems to gather that information along the way.

Figure out what your indicators are and how you will show that you met them before you start. Develop a system to communicate progress against all indicators transparently to all staff (yes, your accountants and secretaries should know how the team is doing too). Get external help to build a monitoring and evaluation database if needed and do it early. Keep your M&E team separate from program staff and ensure that they have an inspection/verification role as

well as a recording and reporting role. Get processes for procurement and HR completely refined and then remade into flow charts that are accessible for all staff (depending on language and education barriers). Read your project closure requirements and plan for them. Initiate your inventory distribution plan, dispensation plan, etc., and keep them all updated. Track your international travel from day one against agreement and keep that ready for an audit (it is always checked first).

Also plan for what will happen after your project closes. Will someone need to carry on the work or will it be done? When I built roads, this was easy to answer - we would pack up and move on and people would drive on the new road. When my goal was to build the capacity of local organizations it was trickier. We expected them to continue to stand on their own and to continue the good work that they had been doing, but without our help. By beginning with the end in mind, the whole close-out process will be much smoother and you will have an answer ready for those tricky sustainability questions.

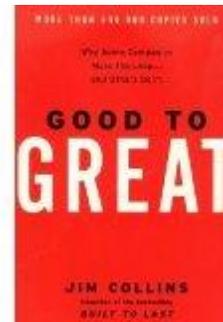
6. Write up a report.

You have been taking notes all along, right? If you don't write up your thoughts, you will forget them. If the project is moving in the right direction, then this report might be for your own benefit - to concretize in your own head what you have learned and what you think. If you want to propose changes, this report is a chance to document your view of the situation and to outline what needs to change. By writing down and sharing your thoughts, you give other people a chance to correct your mistakes and to clearly understand what you want to accomplish. It is much easier to propose concrete ideas for change based on a written document than in a general discussion.

7. Keep Reading.

I trust that you know the basics such as how to develop a Gantt chart and how to use it to track your progress, how to read your financial reports and how to track your resources and your project indicators, the difference between tracking spending and tracking progress, and how to write effective reports and get them submitted on time. No matter how good you are at leading, you will fail if you do not have the basics right!

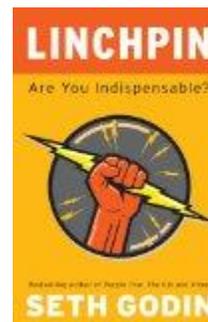
Once you do have the basics down, the next challenge is to be great. Your best guide to being great is Jim Collins book [Good to Great](#). In an annex to the audible version, one of his students asks Jim, "Why should I strive to be



great?" Jim replied that being great was no harder than being just good and in many ways easier (although it requires more discipline) and it was infinitely more fun. You need to be great not just so that your project succeeds, but also so that you can line up your next project.

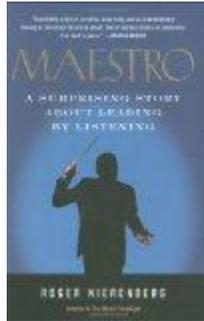
Other books that I would recommend are:

[Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?](#) and [All Marketers are](#)



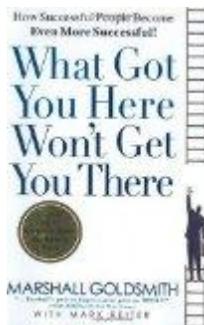
[Liars](#) (both by Seth Godin): The first is on how you can be great and extraordinary even if your organization isn't. The second book focuses on how to create an organization that tells an authentic story that will convince others to believe in you and in the work that you are doing

[Maestro: A Surprising Story About Leading by Listening](#) (by



Roger Nierenberg): This is a wonderful business parable about how different parts of an organization view the organization differently. A flautist and a drummer are each integral to producing beautiful music, but each hears a very different tune. By understanding each other's point of view a bit better, a team can make beautiful music together.

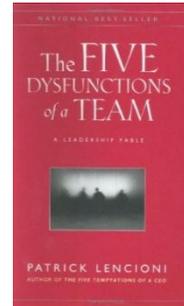
[What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful](#)



[People Become Even More Successful](#) (by

Marshall Goldsmith): Yes, you are awesome. But you are not successful because you are annoying. You are successful despite it. Marshall has helped thousands of arrogant executives become more effective leaders. Focus on one thing, involve others in the process, and measure the change.

[The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable](#) (by



Patrick Lencioni): You are not really the director of a project or the chief of a party. You are the leader of a team. If your team works well, your work will go well. The Five Dysfunctions of a Team is a great guide to how to make your team work well.

Again, Congratulations on your new post! It should be a great adventure and a lot of fun.

Let me know how it goes!

I would like to thank the member of the Chief of Party Exchange LinkedIn Group for their contributions to this e-book, especially Marc Shiman, Donna Read, David Adriance, Moshen Shawarby, John Palmucci, Sani Daher, Mark Belcher, Fawad Khan, and Eric Berghold. I would also like to thank Doireann Hobbs for fixing the mistakes in the text—any remaining ones are my fault alone!

[Daniel O'Neil](#) spent twenty years directing projects in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. He now spends his days in a headquarters office trying to help other people do the job that he misses doing himself. You can read more of his conversations on managing great projects and the challenges of rebuilding Haiti at www.danieloneil.com.