

SCRAPPY PROJECT MANAGEMENT™

*The 12 Predictable and Avoidable
Pitfalls Every Project Faces*



 **SCRAPPY ABOUT** **KIMBERLY WIEFLING**

Copyright © 2007 by Scappy About™

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. No patent liability is assumed with respect to the use of the information contained herein. Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author(s) assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

First Printing: September, 2007

Paperback ISBN: 1600050514 (978-1-60005-051-0)

Place of Publication: Silicon Valley, California, USA

Paperback Library of Congress Number: 2007935615

eBook ISBN: 1600050522 (978-1-60005-052-7)

Trademarks

All terms mentioned in this book that are known to be trademarks or service marks have been appropriately capitalized. Scappy About™ cannot attest to the accuracy of this information. Use of a term in this book should not be regarded as affecting the validity of any trademark or service mark. Scappy About™ is a trademark of Happy About®. Scappy Project Management, Scappy Project Leadership, Scappy Leadership and Scappy Dialogues are trademarks of Kimberly Wiefling. Scappy About is a Happy About® series.

Warning and Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to make this book as complete and as accurate as possible, but no warranty of fitness is implied. The information provided is on an "as is" basis. The authors and the publisher shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to an loss or damages arising from the information contained in this book.

c h a p t e r

5

Why Plan? Let's Just Get Moving!

Create viable plans & schedules that enjoy the team's hearty commitment.

“A carelessly-planned project takes three times longer to complete than expected; a carefully planned project takes only twice as long.” - Golub's Law

Common sense says that when working on a project with results that matter, teams should agree on a plan of how to achieve the goals, consider what might go wrong, and make sure everyone who needs to deliver results is committed to doing what needs to be done to make it happen. Here's a bit of news about the real world of project management: Common sense isn't common practice. It's not even common knowledge. Most so-called common sense is so obvious that people think it “goes without saying.” Unfortunately, *nothing* goes without saying!

Given a choice, most people will either under-plan or not plan at all. Many crises experienced during a project can be traced back to poor planning in the early phases. Most projects are under severe time constraints, so planning must be accomplished quickly in order to meet those challenging deadlines. Planning never feels like the right thing to do. When there is a mountain of work piled in front of you and you're already late, the last thing you feel like doing is sitting down to set clear goals, clarify assumptions, and lay out milestones, owners, and due dates for deliverables. As a result, projects routinely suffer from under-planning. This is especially true of projects led by novices or by people occupying the position of a project manager but lacking the discipline of professional project management.

How do inexperienced people end up at the helm of critical projects? Some execs assume that any sensible person can be an adequate project leader (even extremely adequate!), so they put the fate of a critical project in the hands of someone who will spend more time wringing them than helping the team. These people may sit in the chair of a project leader, but make no mistake—they aren't real leaders. They're often smug amateurs, the kind of people who carry around a clipboard and check things off. These guys just jump in and work like hell to get the job done, skipping over silly little things like clarifying success criteria or creating the buy-in and support of key stakeholders. Just a smidgeon of planning, a pinch of risk mitigation, a dash of clear roles and responsibilities can put you head and shoulders above most project managers.

Plan? We've Got Real Work to Do! The first temptation that any project manager must overcome is the tendency to start working on the project before the goals are clear. After all, during the planning process no code is written, no sheet metal cut, no circuits laid out, no products built, shipped, or even sold. (OK, sometimes products are sold before they are even developed, but we don't want to go there, do we?) The temptation is to get the team busy, busy, busy, working on “stuff” rather than planning effectively.

It's been said, “Fail to plan and plan to fail,” but planning just isn't the kind of activity that garners attention, accolades, and appreciation. The planning process can even seem like a barrier to “real work.” Activity can be a seductive substitute for progress. Human beings are notoriously prone to shortcutting the planning process and jumping

right into activities that may make little or no contribution to the desired end goal. It can be months before anyone notices because being busy feels so good! It passes the time, and makes it seem like we're making headway even if we're just racing around full speed ahead in a great big circle. Like a salmon swimming tirelessly against a mighty, rushing stream, little progress may be made in spite of a tremendous investment of effort.

Every hour of planning saves about a day of wasted time and effort.⁸ It's simple, and yet, given a choice, most people will do little or no planning whatsoever. What's up with that? Think about it. When you're planning, it doesn't look like any work is getting done. You're just ... planning!

One reason why teams are reluctant to plan sufficiently is because they know that things inevitably change. Knowing that a plan is susceptible to sometimes massive changes, most people would prefer knocking a few tasks off of their individual task list to spending valuable time drawing up a project plan that might be changed at any moment.

Every team member needs to realize that planning is real work, deserves time and attention, and can be of far greater importance than rushing headlong into the project. This realization alone, however, does not mean that things will go smoothly. Remember our dead moose and our lost whale? Well, they aren't the only mammals endangered by projects that are out of control. The most amazingly hideous things can and do happen on projects, and many of them can be avoided-or mitigated relatively painlessly-with a small investment in the planning process.

When a team is in chaos, and people are starting to wander into the tidal zone, what they need more than anything is a little time to think. All a project leader needs to do is call a meeting and insist that planning be done. If we call a halt to the frenzy and put some sensible plans in place then there's at least a chance that any further activity will result in real progress towards the goals.

8. Steve McConnell, *Software Project Survival Guide*. (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press, 1998), p. 36.

Schedules Shouldn't Be Found in the Fiction Section of the Library. One of the most important parts of many projects is the committed project schedule. Schedules can frequently be the soft underbelly of project planning. The most meticulously detailed Gantt chart can mask a multitude of uncertainties. Why are schedules so tough to plan? Because most projects are late even before they start. Frequently it's because they should have been started months earlier, mind you, but until time travel is invented I'm not taking on that challenge! And some projects just pop into existence with little warning, landing on the fast track of "Get it done ASAP."

Once a project is in motion many teams can be loath to spend the time required to create a realistic, fact-based schedule they can stake their reputation on. Even if you can get a team to step back and take a whack at a decent schedule, most of the resulting plans are unrealistic from the get go. In my experience, the most significant causes of hideous performance against schedules are:

- Human brains are just plain lousy at making estimates, and that includes estimating task durations in project schedules.
- Bottom-up scheduling methods pay too little attention to handoffs and integration points.
- Executives and project leaders engage in "The Lying Game."
- Teams wait until the schedule slips before intervening.
- Lessons learned from the previous project aren't applied to the next project.

You don't need to be a fortune-teller to know that pretty much all schedules using single-number estimates for durations and due dates are wrong. It's been well known for decades that using weighted average ranges, including best case to worst case estimates, enable far more accurate schedule predictions than those popularized by software programs like Microsoft Project. You can con a sucker into committing to an impossible deadline, but you can't con him into meeting it.

Critical Path Hot Potato. Fortunately, many supposedly “time-critical” projects aren't. Very few amount to a death sentence for the project or the company if the schedule slips. But occasionally a project deadline is more than an arbitrarily established ruse to “motivate” the team to “go the extra mile.” There are times when a schedule absolutely must be met in a predictable way, without fail. That's when you need to cut through the all too prevalent web of lies and self-delusion. Most schedules earn smirks and derision from the team far before it is obvious that they were never more than a grand illusion. When you need a schedule that you can take to the bank, it's time to cut the B.S., pull out your scrappy scheduling skills, and unmask the naked and shivering truth.

In these circumstances, it's unwise to placate executives who demand an unrealistic schedule that will ultimately slip week by week to the original realistic date. Grow a backbone! Don't say it's not possible-that instantly blows your credibility with executives who must deliver critical business results. But do have an open and honest conversation about what it's going to take to make it happen. Don't let the critical path hot potato land in your lap! Take sensible steps in creating your schedule, or it's déjà vu all over again for you and your project team.

It's easy enough to say and mighty difficult to do. Regardless of company size, executives seem united in their lack of understanding of the interdependency of the quality, features, budget, and schedule of a project. Understandably driven by business needs to announce, launch, and ship products around certain market-driven dates, they often appear to be unreasonable, even irrational. A project leader may spend hours, days, or weeks creating a detailed project plan, including detailed timelines, resources, risks, and mitigation, only to have an executive arbitrarily tell them to “cut two months off of the schedule” without changing the scope or adding resources. It's at this point that the difference between a Scappy Project Manager and someone merely filling the chair of a project manager becomes clear. Nodding compliantly like some kind of bobble-head doll just doesn't do your team justice.

Time to Think. People tend to think that they know what to do, and don't need to write it all down. It can be very satisfying to charge ahead. But consider this: most people forget at least 50% of what they hear at a meeting the minute they walk out the door, and fully 80% within two months of the meeting. The faintest pencil is more persistent than the strongest memory. As a project leader, you can best enable your team to avoid this predictable and avoidable pitfall by insisting that they follow this simple project planning process:

1. STOP!
2. THINK! (at least for a nanosecond)
3. Then, and ONLY then, ACT!

Attacked by Plan-ophobia. Believe me, people with adrenal glands working overtime are not going to think of this option, but they desperately need to spend time thinking and planning-individually and collectively-before tackling the next pile of work. The best way to do this is to have a set of guiding principles for project planning and stick to them.

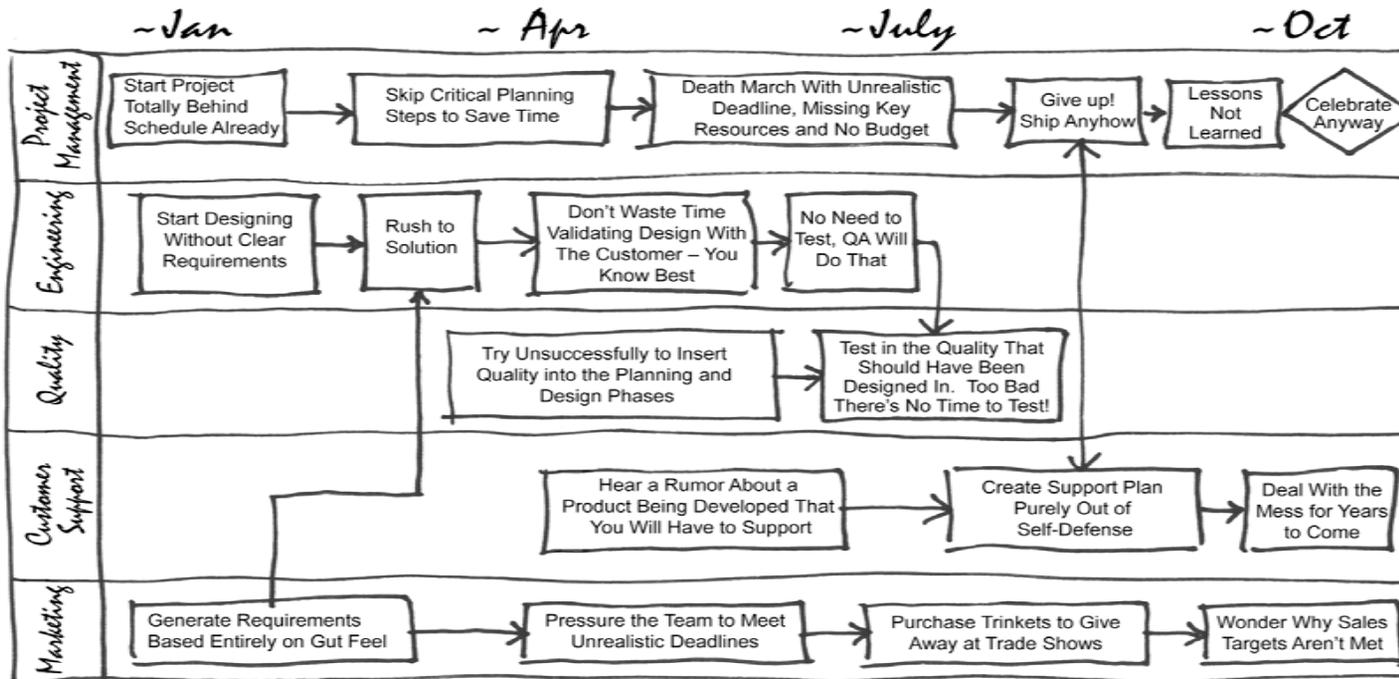
Fearless project leaders insist on appropriate planning even when the mobocracy clamors for mindless motion. Liking it is optional; doing it is mandatory. Sometimes asking your team to spend a day hip deep in the planning process takes real guts. Naysayers will claim that there is real work to be done, and those who are uncomfortable or inexperienced with project planning will need your step-by-step guidance to grope their way through the process.

When I ask about project plans, sometimes a Microsoft Project Gantt chart is thrust into my sweaty little hands. Don't mistake a Gantt chart for a project plan. Microsoft Project was invented to make a messy and chaotic process look tidy and well defined. This is a dangerous illusion, and may lull your team into a warm, soft koosh ball of security that will turn into a porcupine right about the time your project *should* be finishing up, which it won't be. Most Gantt charts look like a map of downtown Tokyo, and are equally incomprehensible. I find that a one-page flow chart with swimlanes for each functional area of the project like the one in Graphic 5 makes a lot more sense. It's also a lot easier for people to follow than a fancy Gantt chart that can only be printed on E-size paper and could be mistaken for the circuit design of

some next generation CPU. Of course, you will want to have more detailed work breakdown structures and schedules too, but this bird's eye view keeps everyone rowing in the same general direction.

Graphic 5: High Level Project Flowchart with Swimlanes

Scappy Swimlane High Level Overview



Even though I grudgingly admit that I do create monstrous Microsoft Project schedules for big projects, I never show those schedules to executives or to people peripherally involved in the project. They're just too confusing to read and too difficult to understand. Instead, I take the time to create an artistic interpretation of the actual detailed schedule in a flow chart form. This flow chart is a one-page map of how the team will move from the start to the finish of the project. It focuses on the critical path and other likely suspects in the competition to be the critical path (because sometimes the critical path tends to jump around a bit like a tourist on a blazingly hot Mexican beach). This kind of visual makes it much easier to have the conversations with execs about the gremlins threatening the schedule completion date. It keeps the attention on the most important aspects of the project instead of diluting attention with the hundreds of different tasks in Project or an Excel spreadsheet, the most frequently used project planning tool.

SCRAPPY TIP: *The planning document is the least of it. The hands-on involvement of key stakeholders in the planning is the most valuable part of the process. Don't settle for a hollow plan that looks neat and tidy. Insist on meaningful planning dialogues with the people who will be doing the work.*

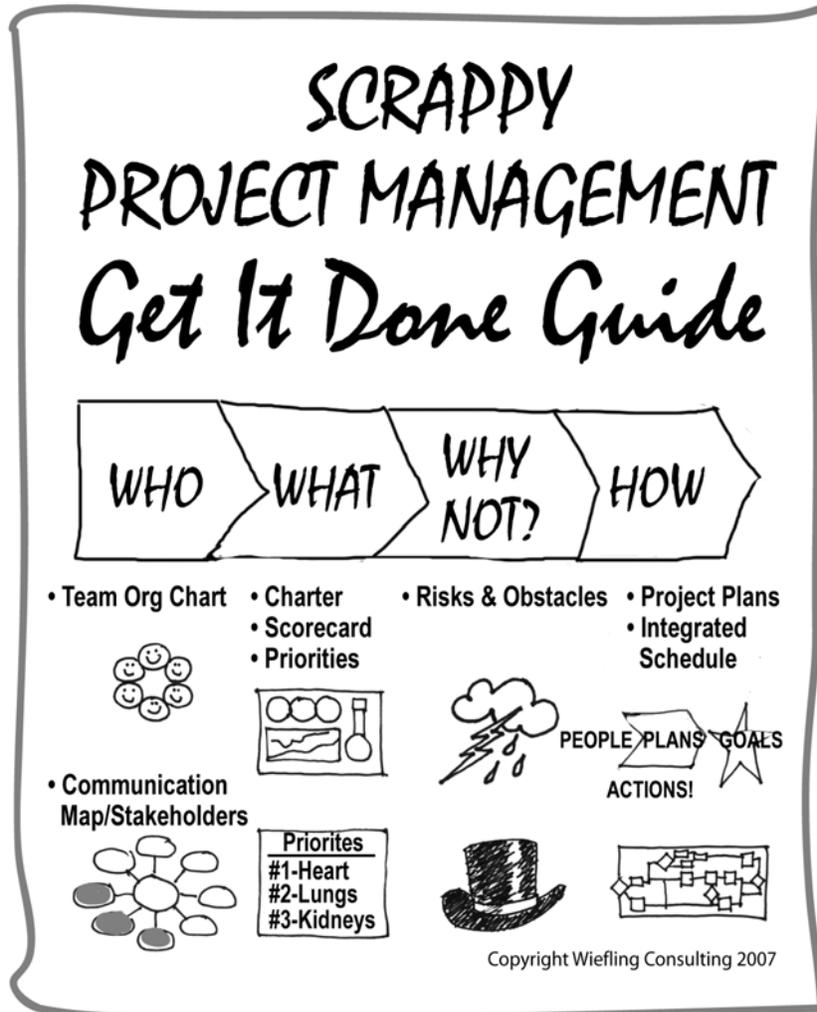
Planning saves time, it doesn't waste it. It will never feel like the right thing to spend time on when you're super busy! Don't wait to "feel" like you have time to plan. Plan with the future in mind. Sometimes project planning focuses too much on the past, on what happened last time, on what has been possible up until this point. This is like driving 200 km/hour with your eyes glued to the rearview mirror! Only slightly better are those who are driving with their eyes focused on the windshield-focusing only on the immediate concerns of the day. Their plans amount to "doing their best." When someone tells me they are doing their best, I worry! Projects can fail quite nicely when everyone is doing their best. In the words of Winston Churchill, one of my favorite leadership role models, "Sometimes doing your best is not enough. Sometimes you must do what is required!" Yeah, that's right, Winston.

Safety in Confusion. Not everyone wants to avoid pandemonium, mind you. There's safety in chaos. It's easier to hide there. As the project plan and status become more inspectable, there's increased accountability. Certain people will become uncomfortable with this increased visibility, as they are stripped of the obscuring cloak of chaos. Sometimes the emperor really is naked, so naturally he starts covering his naughty bits! As a project leader, your role is to ensure that enough planning occurs to effectively deliver results regardless of how busy people are. My motto is, "Just enough planning to optimize results. Not a drop more! ... but not a drop less either."

Some people even become addicted to the adrenaline rush of "forfeiting," scurrying around in a tizzy extinguishing the latest project-threatening blazes bursting into flames around them. Beware: Firefighters carry matches! Don't encourage these pyromaniacs by paying them too much attention.

It's tough to keep your head with all of the commotion that goes on during a project, so it's helpful to have some guiding principles to follow when things get murky. A recipe doesn't make cookies, but it's a start. Here's a one-page recipe to planning that I have been using for years to guide me through treacherous waters. (See Chapter 6, "Risk? What Could Possibly Go Wrong?"). This recipe helps me stay focused on what's important when stress rises like the mercury in a thermometer in the Arizona desert and drives all of the blood from my brain. When I'm not thinking straight I can follow the recipe and avoid adding to my own problems by skipping over the basics. I don't follow this precisely, of course, but at least when I depart from it I do so thoughtfully, not by accidentally forgetting some important part of the planning process. Don't use my recipe, for Pete's sake! Make one that's your very own that suits you and the way you work.

Graphic 6: Scappy Project Management "GET IT DONE" Guide



Great chefs don't need a recipe, but good cooks can cook like a great chef with the right recipe and the discipline to follow it.

Baking Your Project Pie. Follow this recipe and taste success in your project.

1. Start with WHO. Identify key stakeholders and their interests, and the team responsible for getting the project done.
2. Prioritize the stakeholders, and use their voices to drive choices in the project planning and execution. Ask, "What will each stakeholder be saying when this project is wildly successful?"
3. Use the insights gained from the WHO stakeholder analysis to develop the "WHAT." Create a success scorecard that captures clear and vivid matrices of success, and the absolute minimum requirements for considering this project successfully complete.
4. WHY NOT? Identify everything standing in your way—risks, obstacles, self-limiting assumptions and beliefs.
5. Separate out those that are "gravity" (out of your control) and those you can do something about. Prioritize those, and get busy killing off those risks before they grow into monster problems, too big to tackle successfully.
6. Put the whole essence of what the project is into a one-page project flow chart. Even better, if possible, put the whole thing on an index card. It's all people have time to read anyhow!
7. HOW? Create detailed plans and schedules sufficient to get started, and review and revise those frequently along the way, as change is an absolute certainty in most projects.

The next time you're looking down the barrel of another killer project, you will be well served if you pause and reflect before diving into the fray. In the middle of the madness, surface for a look around before digging into the pile of work that awaits you. Cling to what you know works. In spite of the many distractions, Scrappy Project Managers must create an island of clarity in a sea of chaos. We must ensure that everyone shares the same vivid hallucination about what project success looks like, sounds like, tastes like, feels like, and smells like. A set of project planning guidelines like those above can be a useful reminder of key areas that are important to the success of your team. Follow the principles, or depart from them thoughtfully, no matter how

you feel at the moment. Remember, professional project leaders do what needs to be done, whether or not they feel like it. Not everyone will like this kind of disciplined approach, but your team deserves a shot at success-and it's up to you to keep your head, stay on solid ground, and guide anyone mucking about in the rip tides safely to shore.

A u t h o r

About the Author



Kimberly Wiefling is the founder of Wiefling Consulting, LLC, a scrappy global consulting enterprise committed to enabling her clients to achieve highly unlikely or darn near impossible results predictably and repeatedly. Her company has helped individuals, teams, and organizations realize their dreams through a combination of courageous leadership, project management excellence, sheer determination, and plain old stubbornness. She has worked with companies of all sizes, including one-person ventures and those in the Fortune 50, and she has helped to launch and grow more than half a dozen startups, a few of which are reaping excellent profits at this very moment.

Kimberly attributes her scrappiness to being raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and to the sheer luck of genetics—her whole family is seriously scrappy. (Thanks, Mom and Dad!) A physicist by education, she earned a Master's degree in Physics from Case Institute and a Bachelor's in Chemistry and Physics from Wright State University. Kimberly spent a decade at HP in engineering leadership and product development project management roles. She then spent four years in the wild and crazy world of Silicon Valley start-ups before leading one to a glorious defeat during the dotcom bust of 2001 as the VP of Program Management. (Indeed, the company was purchased by Google, but as luck would have it, for pennies on the dollar... Drat!) Vigorously scrappy, she reemerged from the smoldering remains of the "Silicon Valley Mood Disorder" to launch her own company, consulting worldwide from Tokyo to Armenia, as well as the once-again-vibrant Silicon Valley.

Kimberly is the executive editor of The Scappy GuidesTM, and a regular contributor to ProjectConnections.com. She is also the lead blogger on the UC Santa Cruz Extension's The Art of Project Management Blog². Feel free to contact her in person at kimberly@wiefling.com.

2. www.SVProjectManagement.net