



Book eXtreme Project Management

Using Leadership, Principles, and Tools to Deliver Value in the Face of Volatility

Doug DeCarlo
Jossey-Bass, 2004

Recommendation

The choice between “traditional project management” (TPM) and “eXtreme project management” isn’t an option that pertains to every endeavor – only to projects with complexities that would swamp TPM. Consultant Doug DeCarlo explains why eXtreme’s tools are better for programs that require major innovation, fast completion and strong financial returns. Extreme project management uses a “quantum,” diffuse mind-set – rather than TPM’s linear thinking – and DeCarlo carefully explains the differences. Alas, his faith in the positive impact of some amount of chaos extends a bit to his book, which calls upon every conceivable tactic, from team training to prayer in a pinch. He explains the importance of the project manager’s mental framework and advises focusing on team members’ emotions as well as their tasks. DeCarlo reviews eXtreme methods, vision, planning, evaluation, tools and other concerns. His book also details helpful scenarios. *BooksInShort* believes that if project managers run into difficulties with this complete manual, their concerns will stem more from eXtreme’s very specific point of view about managing projects than from any technical issues with DeCarlo’s thorough text.

Take-Aways

- If your project requires speed and innovation, “eXtreme project management” is a better fit than “traditional project management.”
- You must manage yourself before you can manage other people or big projects.
- Collaboration and a healthy emotional environment are both crucial factors in eXtreme project management.
- Extreme projects require a new “quantum mind-set,” not traditional linear thinking.
- Courageous managers do the right thing even if they are fearful.
- Create your team carefully by matching the right talents to the necessary tasks.
- Work closely with your sponsor to capture your project’s vision.
- Your project will run more smoothly if you enlist your stakeholders’ support.
- While planning is important, eXtreme projects focus more on “learning by doing.”
- Establish constant, instantaneous communication so your team members are always flexible and responsive.

Summary

Getting Your Mind Right

Modern business has to work in a fluid environment. “Traditional project management” (TPM) methods are too stable and slow; they strive to be too linear and neat in a messy world. While “eXtreme project management” is chaotic, it allows you to work quickly and to develop just-in-time implementation, rather than writing plans that turn out to be more fiction than reality. If TPM is “Newtonian mechanics,” eXtreme is “quantum mechanics.” Using this approach requires changing your mind-set. With TPM, you build a long, step-by-step sequence of activities. With eXtreme, you accept uncertainty; you acknowledge that things will go wrong and that some matters are simply outside your reach. The traditional method tells you that security comes from tight control, but the eXtreme method allows you to find security by relaxing your grip to the right degree. Extreme project management is more like the approach of an improvisational jazz musician than that of a classicist working from a fixed musical score.

A Model for eXtreme Success: Manage Creativity Instead of Tasks

Using eXtreme project management helps you thrive amid the real world of change and unpredictability. Rather than focusing on tasks, concentrate on the people who perform them. Provide room for participants to use their talents; help them stay emotionally healthy and energized. An eXtreme endeavor goes beyond the typical definition of a project as an effort to produce a product or service. Instead, it is “a process throughout which thoughts and emotions take form.” Your job is to facilitate your team members’ stream of creativity and their feelings about the project and each other. This may not be linear. You could run through some or all of the eXtreme cycles – being visionary, speculating about outcomes, being innovative, disseminating information, and re-evaluating – a few times. Embrace change as a positive factor. Realize that people want to perform well and do meaningful work. Give your team members connection and ownership of their work. Never let a plan become too complex. Keep it as simple as you can.

“Traditional project management is about managing the known, but eXtreme project management is about managing the unknown. You don’t manage the unknown the same way you manage the known.”

To exude the right energy as a team leader, adopt a positive attitude and set healthy priorities. Keep your team interactions constructive and uplifting. Flow with reality rather than trying to force events into a straight line. If you bash your soft head against the hard granite wall of real life, you’ll make yourself and your team miserable, and you’ll sap your program’s energy. To achieve “self-mastery,” you need to “see yourself, be yourself and assert yourself.” Understand how your purpose connects to your project so you develop a compelling vision. Gain authentic power by staying aligned despite any chaos around you. Show respect for others so you can communicate effectively and advocate genuinely for your endeavor. Tap into your inner power physically, mentally and spiritually. In a pinch, “ask for a miracle,” and recite the “Serenity Prayer” to achieve a steady frame of mind: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

The Role of an eXtreme Project Manager

View your project like a gardener views a field of flowers. Position your crop to get sunlight, select plants, fertilize the soil, provide water and tend the growing blooms. But remember that you don’t make the plants grow; you enable their growth. Do the same for your people. Provide the right environment and conditions for them to flourish, but don’t make them puppets.

“The new definition of...project management shifts the emphasis [to] creating an environment that fosters good thinking, positive energy, fluid communications and robust collaboration.”

An eXtreme project manager must get the politics and policies right. Recruit the strongest possible sponsor. Identify critical stakeholders; make sure your goals are aligned. Base your leadership on your ability to persuade, not on assumed authority. Establish a solid infrastructure to help your team make good decisions. Work toward the results your clients expect so they will value what your team does. Facilitate positive solutions to interpersonal problems. Be a coach, not a boss. To build trust in your leadership, inculcate “process values,” including transparency, cooperation with customers and heightened knowledge drawn from doing the hardest steps first, even if you fail. Build “business values,” including purposefulness, goal orientation and quick delivery of a worthwhile payoff. Also develop the “four people values”:

1. **“People first”** – Foster success by identifying what isn’t working and taking action.
2. **“Honest communication”** – Show people that they can be perfectly frank, without any repercussions.
3. **“Quality of life”** – Encourage balancing work with leading healthy personal lives.
4. **“Courage”** – You will feel afraid at some point; do what is right anyway.

“Extreme projects are about planning, deplanning and replanning.”

An eXtreme team consists of people with necessary, complementary skills. Team members must work together constructively so they can accomplish a total goal that is more than the sum of each member’s skills. You must have a team; a group cannot accomplish an eXtreme scheme. Groups are amalgams of people working under the same manager but without the mutual accountability of a team. While group members may be widely distributed geographically, eXtreme team members must be in the same place so they can work together quickly and closely. Distance would break their creative connection. Assure your team members that you will stand behind them if they make mistakes. As you earn the right to lead, their productivity will increase. Focus on their success instead of emphasizing avoiding mistakes.

“Overplanning the project will not only waste valuable time; the resultant detailed plan will be a group exercise in fiction writing.”

As a project manager, you must know what effort and materials each task requires. Your sponsor should know which people onboard need what resources and why. You and your sponsor must plan how to get the resources and personnel for each task, whether each step is worth doing, and whether it remains worthwhile over time. Don’t join a project if it is set up to fail, and never get so attached to an undertaking that you press on even when you see that it’s a nightmare.

Your Sponsor’s Vision

An eXtreme project must have solid, internal support from an executive sponsor. Since many sponsors have only a vague idea of what they want, your first job is to help your sponsor codify an action-oriented vision. Determine the “objective, deliverable, outcome” and “benefit.” The objective states the business goals, the deliverable embodies what you hope to create or accomplish, the outcome lists the planned results, and the benefit is the reason the project’s impact is compelling. Be sure you know why the goal matters, the intended quality of the deliverable, the surrounding business climate, the fiscal impact, the timing and schedule, the required resources, and the repercussions if the firm doesn’t do this assignment. Learn who your stakeholders are and why this endeavor is significant to them. Once your sponsor understands your project and its risks, work together to give others a clear picture. Use your vision to lessen any damage that rumors or criticism create and to convince every stakeholder to help.

“When the stakes are high and failure is not an option, when speed, innovation, and profitability count, eXtreme project management excels and traditional project management bogs down.”

A stakeholder can affect whether your project succeeds or fails, so if you don’t manage stakeholders’ expectations, you risk driving your plan off a cliff. Neglected

stakeholders can sabotage your efforts. Ask your sponsor to help you get each person on board. Stakeholders must understand how your endeavor will directly benefit them and help the business. If you have many stakeholders, bringing them together may be counterproductive because their interests may not align. Investigate natural groupings, but be aware that each stakeholder is an individual.

Benefits, Feasibility and Plans

Create a “benefits map” to clarify your thinking. Use concise, compelling language. Conduct scenario planning, not to predict the future but to make sure you identify potential complications so you can plan responses to a range of circumstances. Extreme projects with short time frames require “time boxes” to keep things moving. Each box encompasses specific work. A time box starts when the team decides how to accomplish the work, and it ends when the work is done and the team recommends the next steps to take. Be sure the subsequent steps are feasible. Balance the effort you spend planning with its true payoff. Don’t plan your project from beginning to end since it will almost certainly change along the way. Planning should:

- Ensure that your “collective vision” is up-to-date.
- Assess the risks and unknowns by creating a “project uncertainty profile.”
- Design the project to follow a deliverables continuum.
- Determine how large each deliverable will be and what work it will take.
- Map out how you will create and furnish each deliverable.
- Calculate the financial requirements and return on investment.
- Ensure that the program’s “prospectus” is current and reliable.
- Identify and arrange to meet technical and support needs.
- Evaluate your team. Find and recruit people with the right skills.
- Identify and provide any special hardware or software tools.
- Create a grid of risks and risk management techniques.
- Evaluate your current management tools and methods.
- Define and line up your “project partnerships.”

Constant Re-Evaluation

Now that you have all the data and resources you need, be sure you believe in and are fully committed to the project. Then get your sponsor’s decision about whether it can proceed. Once these elements are in place, move ahead. Keep your program in a state of flow. Don’t settle into fixed solutions too quickly. Begin with several options, and test them to identify the best path. An eXtreme project’s manager should constantly ask if the planned program is still the right project. Remain aware that you still have time to pull the plug. This is a valid, important choice; do not dismiss it because you have a fever to push ahead. Always do what is best for your company rather than marching through a plan simply because it has approval.

“Extreme projects are like jazz. To the unaccustomed ear, jazz might appear to be random and chaotic, but it is not. There is a framework, and the jazz musician has a lot of room to improvise within it.”

If the undertaking is going to fail, figure that out early so it costs less. With a short program lasting half a year or less, re-evaluate every three or four weeks, particularly if you have only a conditional go-ahead. Re-evaluations require judging the future and deciding on an ongoing basis whether your assignment remains a good fit or a good fix for the problem the firm is addressing. You do not want to have to look back and assign blame or wax nostalgic. Since delivering your service or product is often a cyclical process, hold daily huddles to deal with issues as they arise so the project does not stall. Be sure your deliverable accomplishes the required tasks and fulfills your sponsor’s mission. Find out if your firm’s staff needs training to harvest the deliverable’s benefits and profits. Recognize the lessons you are learning and document them. “The process of discovery characterizes the heart of eXtreme project management,” and such learning conveys value you can use to your benefit in future missions.

Successful Project Communication

Because eXtreme projects focus on speed and quick adaptation, your team must communicate moment-by-moment in real time. Let everyone know what you expect, and solicit feedback about matters you need to handle differently. While you can use a range of technologies, be sure that your communication system takes advantage of the web and includes everyone who needs to tap into it. Your system should be a robust, accessible, trusted resource of project information and a means of collaboration. Rather than trying to implement a perfect system, settle for one that is good enough and available quickly. Install a customizable system that doesn’t need many support resources and that you can upgrade when new technology comes along. Your team members and corporate users will infect each other with enthusiasm or hatred for your communications system.

“Jazz is not ad hoc. Nor is eXtreme project management, as many mistakenly believe.”

Extreme project management demands cutting through bureaucracy. Work across organizational silos, not within them. Calibrate your tasks and assign specific responsibility. Align your eXtreme methods flexibly with your customers’ wishes. Focus on relationships rather than flogging people to accomplish tasks. Emphasize learning by doing. Since the world now behaves like a series of eXtreme projects, adopt a mind-set that helps you function in that context.

About the Author

Extreme project management teacher and facilitator **Doug DeCarlo** has worked with more than 250 project teams.
