

8. Tara Melvin: Making Dreams Come True

[music]

00:04 Speaker 1: It's basically getting what they want, so that whenever they step in that room, they're saying, "This is what I wanted. This is what I have been dreaming of."

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00:22 S?: From the Washington, DC chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

00:32 Speaker 2: Project managers, what if your role was dream maker or perhaps dream keeper? Managing a project where stakeholders' expectations are everything when considering the success of the project? Where you don't just plan and execute, but shape the experience inside the budget you are handed and make dreams become valuable memories? The project? A wedding. The project manager? The wedding planner. Today, we discuss the ultimate personal project, the wedding, with wedding planner, Tara Melvin of Perfect Planning and the president of the Association of Wedding Professionals.

01:07 S2: I would imagine that stakeholders are an important aspect of any client-based delivery, but certainly in a wedding.

01:13 S1: Well, with a wedding, you have a lot of stakeholders. At the top of that tier is the client that you're working for, because they are the major stakeholders. They're the people that you have to please. They're the ones that you have to provide that end result to.

01:26 S2: Who is that typically? Is it usually the bride, always the bride, not always the bride?

01:30 S1: It can vary. Most of my clients, they're in the 32 to 40 range, so they're more mature and they're paying for their weddings themselves. They're not getting any help, so the bride and the groom are very, very heavily involved. The other stakeholders are the individual vendors that I'm working with, because as we work as a team together, we all have to produce a phenomenal result, and that result for us leads to getting the awards that some of the wedding industry people get. Or being recognized in Washingtonian Magazine or the Knot for producing successful events. So the other industry professionals that are helping you to put this event together, they're your stakeholders also.

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02:19 S2: Do you believe that you see a wedding from the beginning to the end in the same way that perhaps the bride does? Is the scope the same for the two of you?

02:28 S1: No. I would say it's definitely different. They have an idea of what they want. Colors, whether they want it rustic, classic. But beyond that point, "How do I get it there? How do I make

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this look classic?" Or, "How do I make this look like a Tiffany themed wedding? Tara, I need your help to get me there." Guest list, they will start out...

02:51 S2: Time of the year?

02:52 S1: Time of the year, they already know that. Do they want a venue where they can have ceremony and reception all in one place? Or are we traveling?

03:00 S2: So they typically know that when they come in?

03:01 S1: They know that, yes.

03:01 S2: So you interview them on the front end to get all that out of them?

03:03 S1: Oh yes. Definitely.

03:04 S2: So they have those kinds of ideas coming to you and then you have to think about, it sounds like the method of doing all of this.

03:10 S1: Yes. So if they start talking about, "This is what I envision for a venue," my head is already spitting off while they're talking, "Oh this venue, that venue." And then they start talking about their budget. We forgot about that.

03:21 S2: Yeah. Let's talk about that.

[laughter]

03:24 S1: Budget, yeah. So is this particular venue gonna work for them? Does this particular photographer match my clients' character? And then, also, as far as color, I have three big binders like this filled with fabrics. And so I'm thinking, "Oh, this fabric would work." It's chaos in the brain, but it's organized chaos. After I've done the detail consultation with the client, then that's when I present them with a storyboard.

03:53 S2: You storyboard this?

03:55 S1: Yes. I e-mail it to them, give them a vision as far as where I'm trying to go based on what they've told me and it's up to them to say, "Yes, this is it" or "You kinda got it, but I want you to move this way." And so we'll have a consult after that to make sure that we're all on the same page, and once they agree to that storyboard, then that's when I start moving and working.

04:17 S2: That sounds like what we would call a charter. We now have agreed with the key stakeholder, the kind of what we're really actually doing, what the main themes are, what's gonna be involved, the basic budget, and the schedule.

04:28 S1: Right.

04:28 S2: So we all know these are the parts, now go put it all together and make it happen.

04:32 S1: That is correct.

04:32 S2: In your mind, what are the biggest risks as you're in the planning phase? How do you handle risk? Do you bother to think about it? Is it automatic in your mind?

04:38 S1: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Once I come up with that design scheme, I'm always going back to my rental company, I get that full linen. I put it on a table. I do a complete table setting just so I can make sure that this is gonna turn out the way I would like for it to turn out.

04:54 S2: You prototype it?

04:55 S1: Yes. So then, when it gets closer to the wedding, like three months out, I do that same identical thing with the client. And I actually work with the florists, so the center pieces there, the florists come to the meeting, and we all talk about this display. What is going on here? So if she says, "Oh all of my colors are pink and purple." So the florist brings the flowers. She says, "Too much purple. Kinda back out on the purple, more pink." So that is the time when we take care of all of that. I will say 50% of my clients, they change something about their decor when it gets closer to the wedding.

05:32 S2: Wow. How many times do they get an interaction like that?

05:35 S1: Just that. Because you don't want to overwhelm them too much. And then you don't want to open up the flood gates either.

05:42 S2: Of change?

05:43 S1: Of change.

[laughter]

05:45 S1: But they feel pretty comfortable with that.

05:47 S2: What else do you have to check in anyway?

05:49 S1: I provide all of my vendors with a timeline, so they know exactly what is going on step by step. My catering staff that's working the event, the photographer, the videographer, the DJ, they get the complete timeline because they're basically there from start to finish. With the photographer, it starts with them as far as "When is my bride getting ready because she wants getting ready photos." We do run behind, but do we ever go over the time? No.

[music]

06:19 S1: Constant communication is so key on the day of the wedding. We walk around with radios that makes it easy so if I need for them to go check in with the bride, somebody's gonna check in with the bride if I can't do that. And then most of the time the photographers because they're in the room with her taking all those photos, they communicate with me via text. So if we do go over time then I have to communicate back to my staff, "We're gonna be 15 minutes behind, 20 minutes behind. Please alert the catering staff so that the food is not coming out."

06:48 S2: So that's real time for you. You're very much moving into very hands on, real time schedule control.

06:52 S1: Yes.

06:53 S2: Do you have a written plan or a written schedule for each wedding that you're working with? Where everyone is on a timeline? Is that actual physical thing you deal with?

07:01 S1: Yes.

07:02 S2: Do you use software for that? Do you use a big whiteboard? What do you do?

07:05 S1: Well, I have co-created myself, and I call it the client workbook, and basically, it's an Excel file that I've created over the years and there's different tabs at the bottom. And I carry, on one of those tabs is a To Do list. And we go by that To Do list. And I even designate, "Is this a Tara responsibility or a bride and groom responsibility?" And I forward that to them and all I want them to look at is the bride and groom responsibility. Anything that's related to Tara, then don't worry about it.

07:35 S2: That's an accountability matrix. We have those, too. Those are wonderful. You're project manager for sure.

[music]

07:45 S2: A lot of the parts that go into a wedding are actually separate industries that have come together in a coordination. They're partners. It sounds like one of the valuable skills you're bringing to the table is the decorative arts and interior design that's an element of creativity that you're bringing to the table.

08:00 S1: Yes, I think that's where my expertise comes in. And then when it comes to the flowers, that has been a learning process. Learning flowers, learning the colors, are they in season at this time? And that's being educated by my wedding professional peers. So with any planner, even though you know your feel, I think you need to learn not be the know it all of everybody else's profession but know something of their profession so that you can be more knowledgeable in front of your client.

08:30 S2: When we watch this on TV, when we see how these shows both in the movies and in sitcoms and in fact now, reality shows, a lot of the stakeholders are saying, "No, not that! Now this!". How much of that really goes on for you as you've moved through this process?

08:47 S1: Do not watch reality TV.

08:49 S2: It's not that real.

08:50 S1: It's not that real. My biggest challenge on the day of the wedding are their guests. Their guests...

08:58 S2: The new stakeholders? [chuckle]

09:00 S1: Yes. So they want the room to be the right temperature, they want the right type of food, they wanna sit in the correct position not knowing that the bride and groom positioned you here.

09:11 S2: So you're at the final moments of this big project, and that's when you get a whole list of your biggest challenge?

09:17 S1: Yes.

09:17 S2: So when you look at this from the big picture, where does it go wrong, that actually is a problem?

09:24 S1: I would say the going wrong part is when you're trying to convince your client, which is your major stakeholder, when it comes to the budget part, as far as them knowing, "What you're really wanting, you can't get it for that price." So it's kind of a little tug of war there...

09:45 S2: We call it expectation setting, 'cause that's really your measure at the end, isn't it?

09:48 S1: Right. So they have caviar dreams but we have a beer budget. And you're just trying to make them realize, "We can't really get that, but let's talk about some alternatives to get you that way." When it comes down to it, it's basically getting what they want so that whenever they step in that room, they're saying, "This is what I wanted. This is what I have been dreaming of".

10:15 S2: So is that when you get your happy moment?

10:17 S1: Yes, and I actually do a happy dance.

[laughter]

10:19 S2: You do a happy dance, okay. When they do it... When it works?

10:22 S1: Yes. On the day of the wedding when I get that okay statement from them, yeah.

[music]

10:31 S2: What are some of the key skills someone needs to be an affective wedding planner?

10:35 S1: Definitely an excellent communicator. A great listener. Organization is key.

10:42 S2: In what way?

10:43 S1: It's knowing when certain things need to be implemented. Handling so many clients at one time, you have to be able to think straight, know how to process all this in your brain. Again, being that project manager and being someone that is not afraid to step outside of the box because...

11:03 S2: Where does that come from?

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11:04 S1: If your bride wants something and it's not gonna fit within their budget, you need to be clever enough to figure out how to make it work, or to communicate with them reasons why it's not gonna work. You definitely have to be able to think quickly and move quickly and if something happens you need to quickly start thinking of alternative ways or how this process is still gonna move without interrupting the flow of your clients event. It's a lot of hard work and I think that anyone trying to get into this industry, that before you open up your own business, maybe tag along with a wedding planner for a day. Especially on the day of the event, because I'm on my feet for 14 hours or more that day. From the time I wake up in the morning, which is usually at 6:00 AM, I am going over my To Do list, connecting with my team, sending them text messages.

11:58 S2: You become a micromanager, for sure.

12:00 S1: Yes. And then at the end of the night when things are all over, I probably get home like two, three hours later, after the event is over with. So it's a very, very long and tedious day. Is it fun? Yes, it is. But just know that fun means hard work.

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12:23 S2: Special thanks to today's guest, Tara Melvin. Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Post production performed at Empowered Strategies and technical and web support provided by Potomac Management Resources. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope and get it done.