73. Productivity

with Colin D Ellis, Sarah Hoban, & Alan Zucker

Kendall Lott: Greetings, PMs. I'm speaking to you now in the midst of the Great Pandemic; the corona virus has brought much of our social and business infrastructure to its knees. And yet we have never been better positioned to move forward, despite these restrictions. Never before have we had the capability to be so connected in such utter isolation. As we gather around our screens for business meetings and happy hours, our perspectives are shifting, perhaps irrevocably. Sometime in the future, we will convene again in the physical world. We'll write on actual white boards and stick flip chart pages on the walls around us. But we will always be ready to jump back now. Virtual is our safe space – our default.

Project management has always been about change. So we must continue to reconfigure and devise new and better tools for virtual collaboration. We will keep on learning, changing, and producing. That's what we do.

Colin D Ellis: It's the most important relationship in the project, the relationship between the project manager and the project sponsor, and we still don't put enough time and effort into it.

Sarah Hoban: So I think it's first having the conversation outside of the work. Who are you? What do you like to do? What is your background and experience? What are you trying to get out of this project?

Alan Zucker: It's not about tools. It's about people really engaging in terms of their work, and knowing what they're doing that's effective and not effective and giving them the opportunities to improve. And leading them through that process.

KL: How can you get the most bang for your project? What are the elements that affect productivity? Is it organizational culture? The team? Does the project manager's attention to their own personal habits affect the team's overall productivity? How about the tools you use? The tools…the tools that used to help, but now, they may distract us. I invite you to listen to three experts – PMs who are speakers, authors and educators – talk about their recommendations for maximizing productivity.

I recorded these before the virus. I am struck now by still how important these questions of how to improve productivity are. And perhaps even with more poignancy. We always fretted about burnout, just generally, and yet strove for more productivity. We worried about procrastination and distraction. Has incessant virtual availability threatened our effective productivity or increased our stress? We had enough trouble turning off Facebook and other social media when it was for fun; or trying to ignore work emails on the weekends. But now how do we protect our productivity as we wrestle the signals and badges, buzzes and banners that used to be distractions, and which now are the way we work?

Announcer: 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.

Kendall Lott: Colin D Ellis was thrust into the project management arena in the years leading up to Y2K. He traveled all over the world, helping organizations prepare for the great digital roll-over, which turned out to be nothing, for those of you who aren't old enough to remember. Today he is an international award-winning project management speaker and author, and helps organizations build delivery cultures that everyone wants to be part of.

After reading his book The Project Book: The Guide to Consistently Delivering Great Projects, I felt compelled to reach out to him at his home in Melbourne, Australia.

KL: By the way, the book is so well laid out: chunks that you can read, and it has actions at the end.

So what's your claim here that we're all missing that we need to sit down and think about, perhaps read your book and perhaps ponder as we actually execute.

Colin D Ellis (03:45): So my thesis is that we talk a lot about leadership and culture, but we don't know how to do them.We think that leadership is a place in a hierarchy, you know, kind of often in a pyramid-type structure, and we think that culture is kind of team…building a team, but we don't actually know how to do it. And from a project manager's perspective, they need to lead, the primary job is to motivate and inspire. We get lost in the, "Let's produce a Gantt Chart, let's do Earned Value Management." It's important stuff, that's part of the method, but really how do you motivate and inspire an individual to do great work?

KL: Well, tell us a little bit about that, because I'm not sure you can motivate other people. I've always pondered if that's really possible. What is it the leader is doing that causes that to happen?

CDE: Yeah, so this is something I learned very early on, because I was a high extrovert working with software developers. I wasn't really technical. I didn't really want to get into the detail, I just wanted to bound about flapping my arms, hoping that people would catch on to my energy. Yeah, that didn't work.

And I went to my boss – and I'm paraphrasing here – I was like, "These guys are idiots; it's like they have no idea. It's like they don't want to be motivated." And he said, "Yeah. Have you ever stopped to think that the way that you're talking to them isn't really motivating to them?" He's like, "These guys are extreme introverts. What they don't want is you bounding around like Tigger. What they want is you to speak quietly, calmly…to understand enough of what they're doing, so you're able to make a decision."

Again, it's not something that we're taught how to do, it's not something that we're taught to recognize, and I talk about this in the book, is kind of that self-awareness. And we don't stop to think, "Well, what are my preferences here? How do I communicate? And then how do I change them to get the best out of someone else?

KL: Here in the Project Leadership, some of the stuff that jumps out to me was Practice empathy, Be yourself, Determine your value. And I thought that was really... Those are very much about yourself, as a leader, as you move forward.

CDE: If your principal job is to inspire and motivate a team of people, you have to fundamentally understand what you stand for, and what you're about. Because only then do you feel connected to your project, to your organization, to your team. And then you can be empathetic towards others, because you understand yourself and then it's about putting the time and effort into building relationships with other people. And so, you know, taking that time I think is super important.

KL (06:13): We move from that, we start talking about building relationships, you end up in culture conversations. So you hold that culture is a real thing and matters.

CDE: Totally and utterly. And I think what made my projects good, and what made my teams good, was the time and effort that we put into culture. We used to spend literally, Kendall, we used to spend maybe a day or two before we started any kind of planning. Just figuring out who each other was, how we would work together. We'd do some fun stuff. We'd do it very informally. We'd talk about a social calendar and how we would mix socially. But for project managers, making that time up front to determine, what does this team look like and how are we going to work together, you kind of avoid all of those lack of buy-in, lack of engagement conversations further down line.

And then no one gets to check out and say, "Oh this isn't my team, I don't feel part of it." Well you were a part of the definition of it. And I think that's crucially, crucially important.

KL: It seems like something we actually should plan for, and schedule for because we certainly don't plan for all of the lack of buy-in later. At three months into the project, I need to go ahead and add another 80 hours, of everyone's tired, bored, laziness. Or, I'm sorry, not bored and lazy, I meant to use your words: where I have to plan for everyone's lazy busy-ness.

CDE: Yeah.

KL: So how do you help people see that? Do you literally tell people, suggest to people that building into their schedule… or have you seen a best practice from this?

CDE: No, I literally tell them. And it's based on my own experience. So every time I hear the excuse, and I hear for a few times, "Oh we don't have time." You know, "The project sponsor wants to get things done straight away." I was like, "You have to have the courage of your conviction." You have to say, "I'm a project manager. My job is to build a team, then a plan, then deliver a project. So I'm going to build the team first."

KL (08:05): I like this, "Start as you mean to go on." What do you mean by that?

CDE: Well, the thing is, is when we start a project, in our heads, we've got this beautiful idea of harmony and kind of respectful discussion, and then it all falls away, and that never happens. So if you've got this in your mind what you have to think is, "Okay well what do I need to build and what do we need to discuss at the start to get that later down the line?"

The other thing that I used to say to my project management teams, whenever I would start a new job. "We have a set way of doing things here. There are certain things that we require at certain times. One of those is a report on a weekly basis. We require that you do it by 12 so that we can collate them all, and, you know, this is how this is the value of that stuff."

Because often I hear project managers say, “I love project management, but I don't like the administration side.” I’m like, “Well what do you mean by administration?” “Oh, you know, making your schedule and doing your report,” and I'm like, "Dude, that’s your job.” And so it's also set in making sure people understand that too, and that we're all in this together. We need information at a particular time in order to keep the thing moving forward.

KL: Is there a tendency, you think, then in from project managers. hearing about how they need to be leaders that it's, “I don't need to be doing these status reports or pulling and culling this data.”?

CDE: Either that or what we're trying to do, Kendall, is impose the toolkit and make it this huge compliance process. We forget project and program management are creative processes. And I think we don't really appreciate that enough. Too often we have someone who's got this hammer trying to smash us down, going, “If you don't follow the process…” Like the process is there to help and support what we've got to do, and so it's part of the job.

KL (09:58): Run meetings that don't suck. So what's going on there?

CDE: Because what we do is we fall into the cultural norms, and we prescribe to that 30 minutes and 60 minutes, which generally the Outlook defaults. We start them late, we finish them late. We don't share them well. We either let people dominate or we... you know, some people don't say anything. And so, again, it's another great thing to do culturally, to set your project apart from everybody else's, and this is part of keeping people engaged. It's just, do it differently. You know, we have 20-minute meetings, we have 40-minute meetings. Still to this day, I have client meetings that are 47 minutes long, and had a potential client come back to me last week, and she's like, “Hahaha, Colin, is this a joke?” I was like, "No it's not a joke.” And she said, “Why 47 minutes?” And I was like, “Just feels like a 47-minute meeting.”

You know, in my last permanent job I did this. And so within a week, people were talking about me, saying, “Who is this guy with these crazy meetings? And geeze, but I’d run them to time and they were well chaired, and we got people in, we got people out. We gave…you know they always started at five past the hour, so that people had time to get from their other meetings. We finished them at 25 past so people got time to get to their other meetings. And I said, to my project managers, if you can’t run a meeting properly, you've got little chance of running a project properly.

KL: Well you hit it. When we go back to back, there's not any time to even transition.

CDE: The prescribed cultural norm in most organizations is, “Oh we’ll wait until everybody gets here.” And then people come in late, and that's okay. We even say it. So someone will come in five minutes late. They may say, “I'm sorry I'm late,” and the Chair will say, “That's okay.”

No, it's not, it's really not okay. Because everyone else managed to get here on time. But I think we’ve become lazy in the way that we invite people to meetings. We haven’t really thought about what's the purpose, what's the value to that individual? We're in this ridiculous scenario where we invite three people from the same division.

KL: Yeah.

CDE: We just need one person who can speak authoritatively on whatever it is. I mean, we invite the world, and his wife without saying, "Can they all contribute?" And then we wonder why people don't respond or decline or think they are of low value to them.

KL (12:14): When I was looking at your methods section, you have a great sentence here, "Be relentless in your search for techniques."

CDE: Yeah.

KL: They can improve your delivery. In other words, it's not just about this method that you're flagging here, it's this issue of finding methods.

CDE: Yeah, we love our methods in project management, Kendall. And there're definitely some that, when applied in the right way, can be beneficial. But what we found, what the research found, is simply trying to manage by methods alone isn't enough. There's no proof that methods alone can deliver success. And we make it about Waterfall and Agile instead of thinking much broader than that, is what something that I can pull from left field? So, I discuss things like Design Thinking. And every time I start my facilitated programs, I always start by saying, "What's good? Because we don't want to lose any of the good stuff. And then what are some opportunities for improvement?

And then it's be relentless in improving those little things.

KL (13:18): One of the most interesting things, as I look at it, is, you went ahead and you said, "Look there are two big pieces here: it's the project manager & project management. And then project sponsorship."And I think a lot of people don't think about the project sponsorship. Or maybe it's thought of as one chapter. But it's actually half the story line here, if I'm not mistaken.

CDE: Right. It's the most important relationship in the project, is the relationship between the project manager and the project sponsor. And we still don't put enough time and effort into it, and I don't think that project sponsors really have the skill sets that they need to be able to effectively get the most out of projects.

So I think it's important that project managers understand what to expect from sponsors, so in a way they can demand it, and the project sponsors know what they should be doing to get the best out of project managers. So often with project managers, there's this fear, based on where the person sits in the triangle, when actually you're in this together. There should no fear, there should be no misunderstanding. There should be great communication, there should be lots and lots of empathy for each other's roles.

And so what I tried to do in the book here is create that understanding between the two roles, and the distinction between the two roles. So the project managers could get what they need out of project sponsors. And also for senior managers who pick the book up, is that understanding of not only the role and the skill set that they need to bring up, but also how to best manage project managers.

KL: I was noticing what you're highlighting here is stewardship. The sponsor owns results and they make decisions, but it opens with stewardship.

CDE: I particularly use stewardship here because it's their job to kind of ensure that the ship stays on course. The project manager has day-to-day responsibility, day-to-day control of the project. So in a way, what we don't want is the sponsor to lead. Because I got my leadership day-to-day, from my project manager. Stewardship is just keeping the boat on course, whereas operationally, they need to provide leadership. The leadership I expect from senior managers comes post-project, when we're in outcome delivery mode, to make sure that culturally we evolve from one state to another. So stewardship is very much about, "How do I keep this ship on course? How do I make sure that we define the benefits in the right way, such that we always know where north is and we're always pointing to north?" And stewardship is, "How do I make sure that the project manager is doing what they need to do to actively lead, inspire, motivate on a day-to-day basis?"

KL: What are some techniques that you've actually seen to work there?

CDE: Some of the hard skills, some of the technical skills, is make sure you've got good scope, make sure that there's a good plan, make sure that you understand the outcomes that you're looking for and they're not ambiguous. And make sure as a senior leadership team, you're all lined up on what the priorities are, because that's generally one of the things that gets in the way is, at an organization level, "Sure we understand the strategy, we understand the portfolio mix, but we haven't taken the time to list 1 to 50 what are the most important things."

Once you've got all of that uppermost in your mind, Kendall, is... It is a soft skill, and of course, emotional intelligence we've downplayed for too long. We call it soft skills, when these are the hardest things. It's the courage to chair a steering committee meeting and kind of deny one of their peers more scope. And say, "Yeah, that's not aligned to the benefits that we're going to achieve here," or, "That's going to reduce the return on investment." And it's to make sure that they performance manage the project manager.

KL: How do you see the decision-making requirements or the decision types, different from a project manager to what you call the steward or the leader or project sponsor?

CDE: Yeah, so from a sponsorship perspective, the decisions that they make are much more strategic. Now a project manager's job is to really make the decisions on a day-to-day basis. How do we bring that bit of work forward? Do we park that there? Do I need to bring someone else over from there to here? That's entirely a project manager's job. I just want the big strategic stuff to make sure that I'm doing my bit to remove the roadblocks that might get in the way.

KL (17:32): Are we measuring the wrong things or do we tend to measure the wrong things? I'm wondering if project managers are maybe ultimately, or often, held accountable to the wrong things and are measured wrong.

CDE: Yeah, it's a subject dear to my heart. We absolutely measure project managers on the wrong thing, absolutely 100%. We measure them on time and cost, which are the very things that change throughout the life of a project.

And so one of the novel things that I did in one of my Heads of Project roles is, we moved the measurement of project managers from time and cost to stakeholder satisfaction. So we did a simple NPS-type approach, which is to say, on a scale of one to ten, how would you say the project manager is managing the project? Why did you give this score? What's one thing they could do to

improve? So it was kind of a self-awareness exercise for project managers to get a little bit of feedback. They should have been asking anyway, but also, we wanted to make sure that the experience that we provided was a good one, and we placed the emphasis on kind of Return on Investment, so outcome delivery versus cost of the project. That became the measure of the sponsor. And geeze, they started to take it seriously then.

KL: I was going to say that's the right thing to measure, then.

CDE: That's right. And we went from a 47% satisfaction rate with project managers to 76% in a year.

KL: Wow.

CDE: Because we changed the way that we measure it yet.

KL: So why not try implementing some of Colin's ideas? Like, Have fun. Dare to Be Different. Be aware of how you're coming across your team, and figure out the most effective way to reach and rally them. And make sure you and your project sponsor understand and respect each others' roles. You can reach Colin on Linkedin or on his website, ColinDEllis.com. His book, The Project Book, is available at amazon.com.

KL (19:31): Sarah Hoban is a PMP-certified project/program manager and strategy consultant, with 10 years' experience directing complex, multi-million dollar projects. She is passionate about productivity as it relates to project management, and is a recognized speaker, and writer on the subject. And as you'll hear, she really ignited my brain over the issue of reporting: just how much productivity is threatened, just in the time spent preparing communications. Yeah, that's a hot button for me. See what you think.

KL (20:00): The topic for me is productivity, and it comes from this human-centric look that you're having in project management. So tell me a little bit more about that, your sense that we're missing something on the human side, and your own personal experience with that, and why that is important.

SH: Yeah, sure.

KL: You hear about soft skills all the time, but that's not really what you're talking about.

SH: It's a little bit different than that.

KL: Yeah, definitely.

SH: I think what we talk about in the PMI world or in the project management world, in general, is frameworks, tools. We get really, we kind of tend to nerd out on that side of things. You know, how can we get a structure in place that helps us operate efficiently? And we think about that as the macro structure that we use to manage our projects. But what we often overlook sometimes, I think, is what is our personal framework for success? And that to me, that comes down to personal productivity as a project manager.

So yes, it taps into those soft skills to some extent, but I think it's broader. It's around the human side, how we interact with our teams.

KL: So when I ask you about that, the personal productivity, the question becomes being able to maintain your own productivity, so that you can work with other team members effectively, I think, right?

SH: Yes.

KL: And having the teams be able to do that. Where does this become a problem?

SH: So I think sometimes we get so wrapped up as a project manager in our role, we expect ourselves to be all things to everyone, and we don't want to let anybody down, because our job is the central focal point to keep things running, right? But I think what we have to remember is, if we don't take care of ourselves, first those that are around us will not succeed. So I think it's figuring out for you as an individual, how you, can be productive and deliver for yourself and for your team to manage a project effectively.

KL: Is it about maintaining yourself at the right fever pitch? I could just see someone saying, “I'm a productivity consultant. Let me help you.” And I'm just going like, "Oh my God. This is more tracking of my activities so that I can bring them to a heightened level of control and quality control, right? I've got to be right within the band of what's acceptable.” What is it that you're approaching there?

SH: So I think that I'm somebody who can definitely err on that side of things, too. And from my personal experience, kind of getting to the point where I found myself trying to be all things to all people, and really neglecting myself in the process, trying to get that, almost like a perfectionist type tendency. But I think there's a gradient, there's a spectrum, and I think there's a journey to it as well. So it's implementing practices in your work life, and potentially your personal life, that allow you to be more successful.

KL (22:26): What's the cost of being wrong?

SH: I think there's a cost in terms of your own burnout, which I then think that that affects your team, your folks that in your personal life depend on you, and ultimately, the project.

KL: Because it's not just a matter of efficiency, in the sense that we think of productivity. It’s not at the cost of failing to do. It's a cost of burnout, of being unable to do.

SH: Yes, I think so.

KL: There’s an emotional component here.

SH: Yeah, and I think it's not so much unable to do. You may be burned out and people don't notice a difference, but you notice it. You're not bringing the same energy, the creativity, the intensity to your tasks. I think there's a lot in the productivity literature out there now about how we don't really make time for the right things. So I think it's figuring out for you what those right things are. And when I say productivity, I think about it as spending your time on those things that are the greatest

reward for you, which then enables you to be more efficient and also helps you be more creative and generate new ideas that propel your projects forward.

KL (23:25): As people work with the tools, there's a bias in my mind to learning how to use the tools well, but also to make them increasingly precise for our own needs. It's almost a call to complexity. What would you say your focus is in terms of your main theme?

SH: I would say simplicity, actually. Every client is unique, every client is different, every client has special needs. But at the end of the day, there's some foundational elements. They're people that you're trying to help at the end of the day. So it's really about figuring out what it is that they need.

And then I think, from a personal productivity perspective, it's, "OK, what tools can we apply as a team to manage the needs of that client?" And it doesn't have to be the most overblown fancy complex tool. It is whatever works for you and for the team. I know in a lot of the Agile project management world, there's talk about needing that team buy-in and consensus, and I think that's oh so important. Because if you pull this tool out that's super fancy and it doesn't help anybody to update it or use it, no one's going to. And it's going to be just another thing that you have to track, another thing you have to worry about.

KL: So, simplify, simplify, simplifiy.

SH: Yeah. Ask the question. Maybe you need it. But maybe you don't.

KL (24:40): So I was looking at your presentation that you'd given in one specific event, at UMD, and you talked about having a mind for ideas, not for holding ideas.

SH: Yeah, so that's an idea from the Getting Things Done literature. David Allan, who's a big productivity name in this space, and he's like the, I guess the Bible of Productivity would be, Getting Things Done, for lack of a better term. I wholeheartedly endorse that system for myself, and that idea in particular was one that really stuck with me.

I've run into a lot of project managers actually in particular I've noticed who say, who pride themselves on, "I have a perfect memory, I don't need to write anything down. I know everything my clients want. I know all the details of my project off the top of my head. Yes, I have these tools, but I am the central node. I'm the lynchpin." So then I think it begs the question of, "Okay, what happens if you're not there for a day?" You know the idea behind successful delegation is the world doesn't go to hell if you take a day off kind of idea. So I think there's that element of it. But I think the other piece of it is kind of freeing up that brain space. So you're not kind of spending your brain capacity thinking about things that you have not written down, because your brain is going to kind of return to them over and over. If you have a trusted capture system or a place where you're recording those ideas, whether that's on paper, digital, whatever system works for you, you can kind of rest easy, knowing that it's there. And you don't have to send time thinking about it.

KL: You're spending up here instead of dropping it in the hard drive.

SH: Exactly, and you know that it's there and you can retrieve it later. More insights come to you as you're spending less time thinking about, for lack of a better term, like the minutia of your day.

KL (26:13): So I guess we own a little piece of many of our teams' to do list. Or it feels that way sometimes when I'm running a team. I have my list and part of my list is making sure they're doing their list, which we come to my list. That's probably not what you want us to do.

SH: I think there's some of that that has to happen, to some level, but then you need to fully step away and not own that task anymore. Of course you're responsible for it. But I think one of the ways that I've done that is with my team setting up a capture system, so we use a kanban board to track everything, and including on that the PM tasks that I'm doing "in the background." I think having those all documented really brings visibility to my team of like, "Okay, Sarah has these six other things going on that I didn't know anything about."

KL: So this Kanban list, let's talk about that, because everyone has different techniques and tools they use. This one is a standard one. You find it very helpful for you, why?

SH: Two reasons. I think one is, it helps with the capture system and the visibility. So everybody on my team sees what everybody else is working on. So there's less time for the PM to have to be that central node or communicator, where you can be the roadblock to communication. Everybody sees the whole plan for the week, and it's there.

And it also helps people, as a junior PM, understand what are the background tasks required to keep the project moving? And how can they start to pitch in and take over ownership of some of those things? One. And then it also helps them better plan their work week because they can visually see everything they've got going on. And as you're entering the work force, gaining experience, you don't always know how long things are going to take you. I think this helps with that.

The other thing that is, I think, an interesting concept, in the productivity literature, is all around procrastination. I'm sure many, many folks listening have that experience of not really wanting to or knowing how to begin. If it's a big amorphous task and you're not sure where to start, like, "Okay I have to write an article for my website, right?" That's a big daunting task.

It's kind of coming up with, Okay, what are the actionable steps associated with that? Okay, so I'm going to generate a list of ideas. Then I'm going to pick one of the ideas and outline it. Then I'm going to do an annotated outline. Then I'm going to contact this person to review. That kind of thing. So you kind of break it down into what your next action is.

KL (28:16): You talk about taking time to do good review. Get a review cycle in there. And I thought…I saw that as the bigger picture, or reflection. That's my personal take on something.

SH: Yes.

KL: Reflecting on what my team is doing, how I'm engaged with it. You had a couple of very specific things. What is it that you would have us do differently there?

SH: Yeah, I think what I've adopted, that I found really helpful, is two things. One is carving out some time at the end of every day, at least a half an hour, to plan my next day. Even if I don't always succeed in doing that, because there's things that come up that take over that time, at least it's blocked as the last hour of my day that's blocked. And I'm supposed to use that time to take a look at, "Okay, what did I do today and what are the three things I want to do tomorrow?"

And this is that Rule of Three concept, which is a big productivity concept as well. And I try to organize that rule of three, even more refined, based on activity type and time of day. So, for example, if I have an analytical task that I know is going to require deep thinking attention, I will pick no more than three of those. It depends how big we're talking, right?

KL: Yeah.

SH: And then I try to have three that are like mindless tasks. I don't know, file an expense report, call such-and-such a person, that I know it's a five-minute conversation, that type of thing. And then some more creative things.

So I have no more than three in each area. Of course, that can vary. I'll look at my day and say, "Okay I'm slammed with meetings, it's going to be one." But you kind of do that exercise, of thinking realistically and reasonably about what you're going to do the next day.

KL: It sounds like you're having a scrum stand up with yourself. What were my barriers? What am I going to try and get done? What am I going to need?

SH: Yeah, and doing that in the evening, like the day before, I find is better than trying to do it in the morning. Because in the morning, we all, at least I do, I see the first email that comes in and it's like a shiny toy, and you just get sucked in. But theoretically, this enables you to know when you first come in, "Okay, these are the things I said I was going to do yesterday. I will start with Thing One first, then maybe I'll take a break and check my email."

KL (30:05): When I was looking at your website, it had a number of topics, and I thought one of the ones that was interesting was the role of emotions. Tell us about that. What do you see in that? Because, we are people, we're supposed to have emotions, we bring ourselves to the table.

SH: Yeah, I think that was an interesting topic. And that came out of working with a long tenured team that I've worked with for a really long time. You sometimes get on each others' nerves a little bit, right? So how do you deal with that? It's kind of interesting to me how we don't really talk about emotions in the workplace, because it's a professional environment. You're supposed to be focused on your work. And we don't really stop to think about the things that may be going on in the background that help us be more efficient or less efficient. You know, are you in a role that's well-suited to your skill set and what you want to do? Are you being challenged? Do you have stuff going on outside of work that precludes you from focusing your energy in the right way?

KL: What are you suggesting people do about that?

SH: To be honest, I don't know that I totally know the answer, but I think it starts with self-awareness, right? Being honest about why there's things that are preventing you from realizing what it is that you want to achieve, and figuring out what that looks like and how to discuss it. I don't know if we're at the place in the modern workplace, where we can go in and have that conversation with our leadership in some cases. If they're supportive, great. But I think it's kind of maybe you take the emotion out of it when you deliver it, but you kind of understand from an emotional perspective what your needs and wants are, and parlay that into what you want to do professionally.

KL: Sounds like we're getting into some of the areas of the psychometric information that helps us become more effective in knowing “type.”

SH: Yeah, and I think it's also cultivating that open communication. So I’ll have a lot of junior PMs, who will come to me and I'm like, "Okay why didn't this get done?” And they'll be like, “Well this person will not get back to me.” And I'm like, "Well why do you think that is? What's the issue here? Is it that your delivery isn't the way that that person's used to receiving the information? Are you not asking the right question? Are you not catching them at the right time?” And again that goes back to the people side. There's no right or wrong answer to that. But it's kind of a trial and error process, and learning that emotional intelligence behind, “Okay, I know this person responds better when I phrase things this way or when I reach out at this time.”

KL (32:10): I had a thought here that some of this has to do with, How can we best set ourselves up for improved productivity at the beginning of the team?

SH: Yeah, so I think as a PM, what I'm trying to do, and I'm just starting a new project, so this topic hits close to home, I just met with my new team.

KL: What will you be doing?

SH: So I think it's first having the conversation outside of the work. Who are you? What do you like to do? What is your background and experience? What are you trying to get out of this project? Who are we as people? So I think taking the time for that conversation, outside of the work thing, like even physically leaving the office, I think is good because I want that person to know that there's a mutual trust there that I'm trying to build. And if I don't approach it from that level, we're never going to get there. I may not be able to help them with this project in terms of this may not check the box on what career goal you're trying to get out of this…

KL: Right.

SH: But I can try to understand where they're coming from and maybe build elements of that into the project to help them. So I think that's one piece of it. The other thing that I'm experimenting with doing is, I have this, what I call a user's manual, about myself and my preferred working style, and that includes some of the personality type stuff that...

KL: So you're handing it to someone else, saying here's the user manual.

SH: I'm like, "Here's me!” And I'll kind of test the person to know if they are willing to accept that because I get that it's kind of crazy and maybe intense. And then I'll encourage them to share with me, too.

KL: What is in your user manual?

SH: So it's about how I operate efficiently and how I like to work. So it'll be, “Here's my Myers-Briggs profile, here's my StrengthsFinder profile. Here's the things that drive me nuts, here's how I like to communicate…”

So I think there's something in there that’s like, if it's a really long, complicated message that you're

sending me, like just come talk to me, it's fine. I don't need you to write me a novel kind of thing. And, just... I'm type A. I'm from New Jersey. I'm going to be direct with you. All that kind of stuff, so that they kind of know what to expect. And then I encourage them to do the same. I'm like, Who are you? How do you like to work and how can we best collaborate?

KL (34:07): The use of outsiders for collaboration?

SH: Oh yes.

KL: Tell me a little bit about that, and why do you think that's effective.

SH: Yeah, so I think it's kind of this idea of disruption. Your team has been working together for a really long time, you kind of get heads down in what you're doing, and you kind of forget to take that step back and think about it from a bigger perspective. So I've done this on a couple of projects. I've kind of stepped in as the diagnostics, I guess, for lack of a better term. I kind of sat in on a couple of team meetings, and watched them discuss. And in the particular example, they were using a tool, and it was just not working. It was like too clunky, they had so much going on, and I was like, "Well what about if you just change this column?" And they were all like, "Oh my gosh, you're brilliant. Why don't we think about that?" And I'm like, "Well you didn't think about it because it's your thing. You're inside it, it doesn't even occur to you."

So, I think it's keeping the team from falling until a rut, because that's the opposite of the forming storming thing. Once you get into the norming, performing, I think sometimes we get a little complacent and tired. "We've delivered this before for this client, it works really well." Okay, so what can we do better next time? How can we make this more interesting? How can we connect with another client about this? So that kind of idea. Continuous improvement.

KL (35:18): What is it you have against Gantt charts?

SH: I don't get them. I just don't get them. Like, I look at them and, I'm not a visual person. So full disclosure, like that's probably part of my issue. To me, I don't get a lot of value in seeing a bunch of bars. I'm just like, "Okay, what is this really telling me?"

KL: It's really about how to talk to executives and other people.

SH: Well, yeah, that, too.

KL: And so, if I'm not using Gantt charts, what should I be using it? There's so many ways to be visual even, and report, I think.

SH: Yeah, I think so too, in this case that was about an executive who wanted that. So I was like, "I don't think this is what you want." He's like, "Yeah it is." And I'm like, "Okay, so here you go, that's here. But then, here's a shorter dashboard-ized version of it that I think is going to be more meaningful and convey better information."

KL: Dashboard, stoplight charts, those are all other ways to represent the information and status isn't it?

SH: Yeah.

KL: Yeah, part of our productivity is learning how to actually communicate the information we spend so much time retooling.

SH: Yes.

KL: Because then we retool it for the executives. They need to see it the way that you need to see it. But I think sometimes I have experienced my own lack of productivity with clients sometimes, has been, they are confusing their requirement with a solution.

SH: Yes.

KL: Give me the Gantt chart…fill in the blank, it doesn't matter. I want the PERT chart, the Gantt chart, I want this thing. What they really mean is, I need to know these things, and I know this is one way that it works, even if they don't like it themselves. Or they just know to ask…

SH: They've heard.

KL: So everyone is re-crafting information in the same way. We're trying to re-tool our information, right? We're just repurposing it constantly.

SH: Yes.

KL: And for me that always felt like a lack of productivity at the team level. Like, I want them to peer right to what the real issue is. Now, of course, somebody needs to have it curated so they can consume. Information has to be consumable was what I kept wrestling with. How to make that efficient. But so many times I think people only know to ask the way they've seen it before.

SH (37:03): Yeah, and I think that's, again, that gets into the emotional side, right? Because you're like, "Okay, this person's coming from... Maybe they don't know a ton about project management. Somebody told them they need a project manager to help them. Okay, I've heard project managers do this. Let me ask for it…" So I think that's the education piece.

KL: And we thought the people side was hard before. Hah! Now do all that virtually, with so much less of that herd interaction and visual cues. But now – how easy is it for us to add more voices to collaboration? It's just as simple as clicking a button. But are there notifications on? So Rule Number One, take care of thyself. And delegate; don't be the sole linchpin in your whole project scheme. Simplify. And please, try not to use tools for tools' sake, and there are so many for us now. Tools are meant to enhance your project's progress and delivery. If they're not doing that, find another approach.

You can subscribe to Sara's blog and listen to her podcasts on her website, SarahMHoban.com. You can also reach out to her on Linkedin and Twitter.

KL (38:15): Alan Zucker has 25 years of experience working in Fortune 100 companies, leading projects and large organizations. He spent six years as the Director of Project Management at Fannie Mae, where he oversaw a huge organizational Agile transformation. In 2016, he founded

Project Management Essentials to provide training and advisory services in project management, Agile transformation and leadership.

KL: I think there's been a case made that project management hasn't delivered on all of the value it could have.

Alan Zucker: So if you look at the Chaos Report data, over the last 25 years, you really don't see a huge change in terms of the number of projects that succeeded. Scope, schedule, cost. The real average is somewhere between 25 and 30%. And when you sort of dig down into that a little bit more, there's a couple of bright spots, shall we say, where we can see projects that are more successful.

One of the areas is, smaller projects are more successful than larger projects. So we can break our projects down, break our teams down. Agile projects are three times more likely, on average, to be successful than traditional projects

KL: Really?

AZ: Yeah. The other piece is that people matter. Teams with high emotional intelligence, I believe they're 2.5 times more likely to be successful. Teams where you have engaged stakeholders and leaders – much more likely to be successful.

And then the fourth piece is, that organizations that have a strong project management culture are also more likely to be successful.

KL (39:58): What does that mean? Strong management culture?

AZ: You know, you see organizations where they know how to execute projects on an ongoing basis, and they've become very good at it. They may have developed their own tools and techniques. They may have adopted industry standards. But they really know how to do it. I was in an organization. When I got there, they were in the middle of their financial restatement, and they were just having a heck of a time getting traction underneath of that. But coming out of restatement, they really knew how to execute projects well. And over the next five years, we managed major initiatives. Initiatives with 100 people involved in them, tight deadlines because of accounting rule changes, and things like that. And we could just run a project by clockwork. And it was because we had developed that culture.

And then when I looked back, when I first started, the organization was undergoing a lot of change, a lot of new people came in. And just getting people to be able to speak the same language and use the same terminology was a little bit of a challenge. And once we knew how to work together, it was really amazing how effective we were at managing just huge projects.

KL: It sounds like it's common terms, tools, and then, ultimately, behaviors.

AZ: Well I think it's also that we know how to work together as a team and I think that's a huge differentiator. When people are working together for a while, it's amazing the things that they can get done.

AZ (41:30): Think about productivity. We can really think about it in three concentric spheres. There's personal productivity. What can I personally do to become more productive? And to a large extent, that's simple. Stop multitasking. Stop being distracted. I love my iPhone, I love my email. A part of the problem is that we get distracted. On average, emails get opened within, I believe, 7 to 10 seconds.

We tend to work on something for no more than 11 minutes before we start working on something else. And those distractions, because we don't multitask, we task-switch, there's 20 to 40% loss of productivity. And some of the things I've done on a personal level, I've turned off the dings when emails come in, I don't have my watch or my phone buzz, on me. And I try to work in concentrated blocks of time. And when I do that, I'm amazing at how much I could get done. And when I begin to stray and let myself, be described, I can see how much less I'm getting done.

I think when we talk about team productivity, I think it's, again, things that we can do easily. It's getting people collaborating, people listening to each other, people working together, people seeing themselves as a team, rather than as a group of individuals.

Let's start asking each other questions. When someone says they're stuck with something, let's have someone else say, "I can help with you with that. I have experience with that." Versus someone just struggling with it on their own. It's not a big thing. It's just getting people to talk to each other again.

KL (43:09): So your perspective there is the productivity can be improved around teams, and your focus is on better communication, collaboration…

AZ: Yeah, and so like some of the things I do for organizations that are not traditional development or technology organizations, some of the lessons from Agile…

KL: Really?

AZ: Yeah, like Kanban boards. Love Kanban boards.

My daughter just graduated from Virginia Tech. And, a couple of years ago, she had me go down and work with one of the student organizations she was involved in. And so I would go down, and I did it for a couple semesters, at the beginning of the semester. And the first thing I would do was established team norms. Because when you've got, particularly a group of college students, but you've got it with boards and like nonprofit boards and other things…every year it's a new organization. Because a quarter of the people have left, and a quarter of the people are new. So you need to re-establish team norms. And then we would go through a session where we would have them brainstorm the things they needed to do for the programs that they needed to run. And I built a Konban board, and I taught them how to run a daily standup. So when the board got together once a week, they'd stand by the Konban board, and they'd give their updates there. And actually they've begun to do it on Trello, but they'd begun to embed that discipline, and I think that provides a lot.

KL: What I liked about what you just said there, was the technique not the tool.

AZ: Yeah.

KL: So the technique is one that's meant to enhance collaboration. Because people know what's

going on better obviously.

KL (44:43): So you talked about three tiers. What was the third? We had Personal, Team and where are we reaching?

AZ: Management tier. The leadership tier.

KL: Leadership effectiveness?

AZ: Good leaders empower their teams. And I'm talking about real empowerment. Not like I'm going to empower you and then watch over your shoulder and tell you what to do. They get the clutter, the impediments out of the way, and they create a culture where people are willing to take reasonable risks, are looking to really do the right thing. And I've been in those kinds of cultures and when get there, it's really a wonderful thing.

KL: How do we get leaders to do that though? Is there something from a PM's perspective that we can see to try to see how we can increase the productivity effectiveness that comes out of that?

AZ: So I think, a couple of things. I think that leaders at any level, moving out of the traditional hierarchical mode of leadership, is the first important thing. Let's face it, the traditional role of management came to us from when we were taking unskilled labor off the farms, putting them in the factories to make cars and other things that previously were the domain of crafts people. And in that case, you had unskilled labor, and management was there to tell people what to do, watch them.

Now, everybody that works for us is a least as well educated, at least as capable as we are, and our ability to unlock that potential, versus telling them what to do and then looking over them and then being critical, I think it's a big shift.

AZ (46:25): And another thing is to just get waste out of the system. This is where we leverage the ideas of Lean. Think of the number of things that we do in the course of our day that really provide limited value, or no value to what we're trying to do.

One of my favorite things is approvals. A lot of organizations require multiple approvals for things. When I was at MCI, my IT group, it was outsourced, and after a few months, they said, "Alan, you need to sign off on the requirements before we'll start working on it." I was like, "Why? We've been working together for five years. Things have gone more or less well. Why do I need to sign off on the requirements? How is that going to change the dynamic of what we do?"

And I said, "What will happen is when we have problems, instead of focusing on how we solve the problem, we'll be focusing on whose fault it is. And that's not productive."

AZ (47:32): Another thing is where we've created organizations that are focused on specialization, and we don't talk to each other. We talk to each other via our ticketing systems.

KL: It seems to me that, then one of the things we can talk about from a productivity perspective, is design. Because as we have so many craftsmen that we're trying to coordinate and connect, and the issue you just brought up, for example, is related to the ability to have oversight that a request was made in someone owned it. That was probably instituted not just for some evil power relationship,

but because of what we would call good communication. How do I know that I've sent you a signal that you've received, and that something's happening? So when we look at effectiveness, I'm wondering then, how much is design?

AZ: You know, the organization may or may not follow the design of the organization. [laughter] If you can get teams to engage organically…that's what matters. And I've gone through times where we've reorganized every six months, and it doesn't necessarily matter where you put the pieces on the box or on the org chart.

Have you set up a situation where if you and I are working on a project, we're actually working on the project and we're not engaged in our organizational politics? Or you're not waiting for me to submit a ticket because I have to submit something through the ticketing system. And I think that when we can make that happen, that's where you see the magic.

KL: That brings up an interesting question to me, though, because that implies an organization is naturally finding what it needs, and is that true? Will they always know what they need? Or is there room for insight that says, We're missing a function here? Basically what I heard you say was that if you have the functions forget how you've named and placed them. Let them exist, let them be, because they're going to. I think we're missing something.

AZ: No, I'm sorry, I did not mean to imply that we will always naturally find the equilibrium. What I meant to say is, you know, there is a magic that can happen in some organizations. I think a lot of it is how we train or we don't train managers. I think a lot of times we give people management roles because they've been good as an individual contributor, but we don't teach them how to manage and how to lead. And it's basic stuff.

How do you give feedback? Are you communicating with people on a regular basis? Have you communicated your expectations? It's funny, a couple of years ago my wife was promoted, and she became manager. And she works in an auction house, and she had hired a new employee. And she said, after the auction, she said, "She did a really great job and I said, 'You really did an awesome job in the auction.'" And I said, "But did you tell her what she did that was good? She must have over the course of that eight-hour day, she must have done 100 things. Did you provide her specific feedback of, 'when you did this, this was good, but when you did that, it was a little bit ineffective. Could you try doing something different, instead?'"

I'm a huge fan of feedback model. And that way people know what they did, positive or negative, what the net result was, and if they needed an adjustment, what specifically to adjust? Otherwise people are sitting there trying to guess, "Okay, I screwed that up. But what do I need to do to do it, right?"

KL (51:05): I intrigued by 170 project managers shifting into an Agile environment. You were having to do that conversion, that change. And that was Fannie Mae?

AZ: Mmhmm.

KL: So what did you find was your biggest challenge in getting people to make that transformation?

AZ: So going into it, I knew that you could not flip the switch on this. I had seen enough fads in trans org, where we're going to do this and do that. So what we did is, for about a year before we actually began the sort of official transformation is, we talked about having what we referred to as our agile accelerators. And we got about 10 or 15 people that had experience and they came up with 20 things that you could do today to make your projects more agile. And it was small stuff. Start having day stand-up meetings. Bring your teams together. If you could, co-locate the teams. Have team launches. And we started those accelerators, and it began to change the culture a little bit, not all the way, but it began to soften the turf, so we began that transformation slowly. Then we cross-trained people.

KL: Soften the ground, and then cross-train them.

AZ: Yeah, because you're not going to take someone that's been in a traditional organization, and say, "Tadaaa! You're agile! You were a project manager, now you're a Scrum master, and now you're going to supposed to act differently and the team's going to engage differently." And that's where we see a lot of the problems with organizations undergoing an agile transformation.

So you really want to set up an environment where people are learning, and recognizing that it's a journey versus a destination that we're going to get to overnight.

KL: So small steps, and then cross-train.

AZ: Yup.

KL: That's the way to get a transformation, that's at an organizational level of effectiveness...

AZ: Also when you're beginning your journey, look for places where you'll be successful and don't transform, you know, we're not going to launch all the ships at once. Find a couple of good candidates, provide the focus there, and learn to adapt from that, because your organization will have its own constraints, or culture. And let's get a couple of learning lessons, a couple of experiments behind it. There's the expression, "From strength to strength," and build on your strengths versus... Let's try to just make it all happen at one.

KL (53:49): So then a last question now in your current phase of your life, where your training, and engaging and consulting, what is the biggest "Aha" that your participants have in seeing their opportunity to be effective?

AZ: Everybody will have their own different, like, takeaways. But I think the fact that I give them permission to say, It doesn't have to be this way; we can take these principles and these ideas and adapt them to what works for us. One of the things I really love about Agile is Agile is not a methodology. It's a mindset, it's a set a values, and it's a set of principles. So, it's learning; it's giving people that permission to experiment. And you and I are not going to adapt these principles exactly the same.

KL: So where does the experimentation come in that you're talking about? Because that sounds like a nice lesson for our listeners. What is it that you would have them experiment with?

AZ: What I would say is, on a regular basis, look at the things that you're doing and look at the

things that are not working, and ask yourself, "What are we not doing today that we should do? What should we stop? What are we we doing now that's just not effective for our culture? And what we change? We're doing something that's good, but it's not quite working for us.

KL: Yeah, modify and continue.

AZ: Yeah, I really like the idea of the right perspective that we do in Scrum and I think that we should apply it to everything. And I think that when we look at the way Americans originally did the Total Quality movement, back in the '80s and '90s, where we made these big, huge projects that tended to fail, we missed the point of Kaizen, the small change for good. And when I talk to folks about doing sprint retrospectives, also look back at what you changed over the last period, and ask the questions, “Did I get the result that I wanted?” Because a lot of times we'll say, "Hey that's a great idea, let's do it.” And then we never go back and consider, “Well, was it really helpful?”

KL: I think a lot times it's because there's a lot of effort to decide what the problem is and what would be the mark of success. We know we want it better, but I think it's hard to define what that looks like.

AZ: And I think part of that is that when we think about our marks for success, we're really thinking about the big things. How do we make that 100-mile journey? That 100-mile journey starts out with the first leg. And I think if we think about what do we need to do for the first leg, and pivot from there and learn from that, it gets a lot of easier.

KL: Small projects, small steps, those first steps you can do, soften the ground, you talked about is probably the right idea there.

AZ: I think that management has an important role in creating that environment and setting those expectations and sort of creating that safe space and those guardrails. It's not about tools, it's not about going out and buying huge processes. It's about people really engaging in terms of their work, and knowing what they're doing that's effective and not effective, and giving them the opportunities to improve, and leading them through that process.

KL (57:19): Optimize all three spheres of productivity: the individual, team, and leadership. Empower your team to bring ideas and innovation to the project. Remember, we can make the big changes with a higher level of impact and lower level of investment if we start small and scale up. You can contact Alan at PMessentials.us, or at Linkedin – Alan I. Zucker. You can also sign up for his newsletter on his website. He writes monthly articles on project management, leadership and Agile.

To raise the productivity level of your team, start by optimizing your own output. Remove distractions. Figure out what tools work best for you, your stakeholders and which ones will actually move your project forward. And again, you can't overestimate the importance of emotional intelligence. We hear it over and over again. Leaders need to understand their own style, what makes them tick, as well as what makes the individuals on their teams tick. For a truly high performing team, every member needs to have that same understanding of their teammates. This, more than anything, will bring a huge boost to project experience productivity and success.

Special thanks to my guests, Colin D Ellis, Sarah Hoban and Alan Zucker.

Announcer: Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Additional original music by Gary Fieldman, Rich Greenblatt, Lionel Lyles, and Hiroaki Honshuku. Post-production performed at M Powered Strategies.

KL: PMPs who've listened through this complete podcast may submit a PDU claim, one PDU in the talent triangle, “Leadership,” with the Project Management Institute's CCR system. Use provider code 4634 and the title "PM POV0073 Productivity.” You can also use the PDU claim code 4634TH96EE. Tune in to next month's episode, Voices of Experience, with Thomas Galvin, Janet Burns and Frank Saladis.

Janet Burns: When I talk about a PMO, I generally mean Project Management Office, versus Program Management Office. And what I mean is a center of excellence; an organization that can help the rest of the enterprise get better at projects.

Fran Saladis: Project managers should develop a brand that differentiates them from others in the organization in that they are producing value, not only for the customers, but for the company, and also for the people that are working on the project.

KL: Visit our Facebook page PM Point of View®, to comment and to listen to more episodes, and get the transcripts. Leave comments on the ProjectManagement.com portal, evaluate us on iTunes, and of course, you may contact me directly on Linkedin. I'm your host, Kendall Lott, and until next time, keep it in scope, don't check your phone too much, and get it done.

Announcer: This has been a Final Milestone Production.