PMPOV0086-Estimations-Oh-My

[music]

0:00:05.4 Announcer: From the studios of Final Milestone Productions overlooking the White House in downtown Washington, DC, this is PM Point of View, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here is your host, Kendall Lott.

0:00:17.7 Kendall Lott: Our long-time running theme song, that's an edited version of Riding the Bull by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Her sister, Mary Flannery, has been our behind-the-scenes editing expert and narrative genius for the seven years of the PM Point of View podcast, and now she is setting off to new adventures. So, I'll be keeping the music, but starting today, we're going to start introducing a new format, back to that round table style again, minimally edited, but can do it with a little bit different flare now.

0:00:47.4 KL: I've invited co-host, Mike Hannan. Now, you've heard about Mike before because he hosted the show one time, as well has been a guest at least three times on the show. So, he and I talked about what we can do with this podcast and where we're going to go with PM Point of View in the future, and his comment was, "You know what, let's focus on elevating the PM conversation," and when he told me that, I thought, "Well, if you're going to bring it up, you got to be on the show." I want to welcome Mike to our first PM Point of View elevating the conversation. Mike, you there?

0:01:17.9 Mike Hannan: Hey, thanks, Kendall. Yeah, and one reason I was so intrigued by trying to help elevate the discourse is because there's part of me that's kind of like the angry neighbor who's always shouting to, "Get off my lawn." I was always thinking like, I'm so tired of a lot of the sort of, I'll call it the standard PM fair of like a better way to do a risk matrix or better ways to communicate with stakeholders and all this stuff, which is important, but in my mind, we've kind of of... There's plenty of content out there that already addresses all that pretty effectively in my view, and to sort of rehash it with a flavor of the month doesn't really elevate the discourse in my opinion, but I'm a cockeyed optimist. I won't be like the angry neighbor yelling at anyone.

[chuckle]

0:02:03.1 KL: Definitely try to channel it in a positive way that we can all have a little fun with, hopefully, maybe even crack a few jokes and just be a bit more... What's the word, welcoming, with inviting more people to join us as we push to elevate the discourse.

0:02:21.9 MH: One ponders what a PM joke sounds like delivered by PMs.

[laughter]

0:02:26.1 KL: Where to go with that. So hey, Mike, so tell our listeners, actually tell me since I've been following you, but I don't have a big picture of it, set the stage for our interaction here. What's your angle of attack on the project management world? What interests you that you're digging into

just generally, where you been professionally with it?

0:02:46.4 MH: Well, I'll take it back using my promise to be positive, I'll take back to my very first amazingly positive PM experience when I started my career at NASA, and we saw the Space Station actually fly. And I thought there was so much angst. There was so much...

0:03:07.1 MH: It was not a simple thing, we were over budget, we had a lot of issues, certainly a lot of strife internally and some conflict, and re-writing contracts with our contracted partners and all of this sort of stuff, and so at times it felt like sort of... Like this project management stuff is just a big bureaucratic you know, mountain of work, but when you actually see the baby get born or the intended result come into being, it was like, ah ha, we haven't focused enough on the value side of the equation, because this is the thing that really inspires people.

0:03:47.0 MH: This is what we actually went through all that trouble with to begin with, and of course, it could have been easier and more trouble-free, less conflict, and all sorts of other things, which probably would have helped accelerate the progress and maybe deliver an even more amazing result, but the point is, everything I had learned in program and project management focused on the cost side of the equation.

0:04:09.2 KL: Yep.

0:04:10.3 MH: And very little on the value side, and I think it's predominantly because often it's hard to measure, so we tend to manage the things we can measure. In my mind, "Well, what if we could measure it better," and in fact, what if we could find ways to get more of what we want, more frequently, more of it, more reliably, and then elevate the discourse that way.

0:04:35.2 KL: So, tell me about the techniques that you'd like to bring to this, that you've got a background in, what are we going to be hearing from from you?

0:04:43.9 MH: I think the biggest value delivery amplifier out there is speed or I'll call it, a lot of times people hear speed and they actually think rushing and getting sloppy and turning something in half done just because the deadline showed up or something like that, right, or ridiculous overtime or stress, or all the downside of speed that they've seen with speed, and so maybe a better way is to just say, improve the flow of value delivery, improve the value delivery cadence, because there's no upper limit there, like we've seen with Olympic athletes, records keep getting broken, nobody knows how fast the human being can actually go, maybe we won't ever be faster than a cheetah, but we keep getting faster, and I'm not so sure about the cheetah. [chuckle]

0:05:31.3 KL: Yeah.

[chuckle]

0:05:31.8 MH: So, right.

0:05:32.5 KL: We presumably can keep improving here, so we are focused on that value thing. That came up a lot in the years of podcasting we've done, and certainly in a lot of the ones that you've been on, which is these projects are investments and they're about value. We'll probably do a whole session on one of the value, on this whole concept of value, get Devo back in here, Steve

Devo, get him talking about some of that too. I know he gets excited.

0:05:53.7 KL: So, Mike and I, listeners, what we're going to be covering is a topic or two each month, and we'll try and get a guest on here, so those of you listening, I'll hit you again with it, queue up some guests for me, we'll get some people on the show to listen in and engage with us to help us answer some questions and tackle some of these key next steps in project management, elevating the discussion, as we said. So, we'll look for questions that you can send in to us, and we'll talk about that at the end again. Now, today, Mike, thank you very much. We have a guest that is a close friend of Mike's, and his name is Hilbert Robinson. Are you out there, Hilbert, you still on there?

0:06:31.6 Hilbert Robinson: Yes, I'm here.

0:06:33.5 KL: Alright, sir, tell us about yourself. What's your area of expertise? What's your lens on this whole project management world?

0:06:41.2 HR: So, my background is in industrial engineering, and I had a good fortune to practice that early in my career at one Boeing Company on the shop floor, and talk about amazing things being done. Coming from Jamaica, I would not have predicted that I would be working for a place where I get to see the 747, Queen of the Skies, be assembled by some amazing mechanics and engineers, and so I was just kind of in awe of that whole thing and trying to understand how does that come about, right, and so I got to practice industrial engineering and a very cool product. And as part of some of the activities I did there, I was invited into the engineering world as the 757 was going to be updated, so I got to be part of a really amazing experience bringing a new airplane into being from, well, I won't say nothing because an airplane actually existed, but now we were going to do another version of it and I started out with the team at the point where the sales team was pointing out that, you know, there is a Guinness Book of World Record that states what the longest commercial flight is and we think we want to extend that and get them to update their records, and so this is the charge they gave to engineering. Is more of a business case to it than that, but you can imagine that part of it was just way cool for me. That's the only part I remember.

0:08:21.8 KL: Talk about focusing on and and that's the only part you remember. [laughter] But I want to add...

0:08:27.7 HR: And then... Go ahead.

0:08:31.0 MH: When I hear Hilbert tell the story, I always imagine the new guy, fresh out of college, from a little island in the Caribbean telling all these world class engineers and aircraft mechanics, "Hey, I think I might have an idea on how to help you improve what you do." And just imagining [chuckle] how he managed [laughter] to get them to actually listen.

[laughter]

0:08:56.2 HR: The story is a little longer than that, but essentially that's... You got it right. It didn't go over so well. [laughter]

0:09:04.3 KL: Oh my God. So, you guys got to... And I don't know what other project managers got to do, but you both got to enter, I'm hearing, NASA to go to space and the other one is to have

the longest flight ever recorded basically, or longest commercial flights, right? Regular commercial flights.

0:09:18.6 HR: Right.

0:09:19.0 KL: So, you had some...

0:09:19.6 HR: Right.

0:09:20.5 KL: High level stuff you guys got to do. I don't know if that's true for all of our other project managers when they got started. I got to go in on a business process re-engineering project that was to cause administrative processes in the Prime Minister's office to be fixed. So Prime Minister's office sounded cool. Administrative processes? A little less cool, not quite going to the moon. [laughter] But later we got to talk about bringing education into a virtual space for people that were in very rural areas out in Southeast Asia, so that was pretty cool. And then of course, the Cloud happened. So back to flow and delivery, if you don't deliver fast enough, the entire environment changes and you don't need all that hardware cause there's a thing called the cloud.

[laughter]

0:10:10.0 KL: Best laid plans advice in men. So, speaking of plans, I want to talk about today's topic. Today's topic is around estimates/no estimates, actually based on the fact that I saw somewhere there was a hashtag, hashtag no estimates that people were sharing. And this comes from another environment that I get to work with, which is the Digital Project Management Forum, and they're a group of people that I've had on this podcast a few times. And one of the things that they have is a forum for asking and answering questions and they were talking about the development for project managers and the core of the question was, without having estimates from a development team, how does a PM manage budget, velocity, schedules and risk? And then there's a whole bunch of problems that come out of that, so I wanted to talk about estimates. Should we even bother? I mean, it's part of our problem that we actually bother to try and estimate, and then we're surprised we missed it?

0:11:03.9 MH: So, I think the short answer to that is no, but I understand. I understand where the sentiment comes from and there's a whole bunch of little yeses that have to be acknowledged before we just kind of dismiss it as a no. And in fact, if I'll just throw out a couple, top of my head, when you are managing... trying to manage a project or any kind of effort or initiative inside an organization characterized mostly by shifting priorities, maybe even chaos, lack of a stable team, right, when there's people coming and going, the notion that we might actually deliver... generate an estimate that's reliable is laughable.

0:11:51.6 MH: And so, my thinking is, back to the origins of the AJA movement with the AJA manifesto, it was basically saying, "Look, you're never going to get anything valuable if you don't let your team do good work." So, it was more about protecting the team. And if you're always nagging the team to give you estimates that are essentially a fairytale because the environment itself is so unpredictable that it's unfair to ask anyone inside it to try and pretend that it is, then it's like, okay, that protects the team and also frees up their time. It probably de-stresses them because an estimate is never really an estimate, it's usually a commitment, right? Somebody says, "Hey, how long do you think you'll need to get X, Y, or Z done? Just give me an estimate." What the person

here is invariable is "Whatever I say, they're going to hold me to". And now there's that level of stress and now the gaming starts where it's like, "Well, it might only take me two days, but I don't dare offer that up because everything is so unpredictable around here. I might not even get the time to focus on it until day three." So...

0:13:04.1 KL: I mean, hey Mike, is it worth to even clarifying that at the beginning then when you're asked from a boss about that is, "Are you really asking me for an estimate for analysis or are you asking me for my commitment?" I mean, it's a legitimate question to ask people from...

0:13:16.3 MH: Absolutely.

0:13:17.0 KL: Perhaps, but is that one of the first things we could do is clarify that right out of the gate?

0:13:20.9 MH: Yeah, but the problem is that the boss might say, "Oh yeah, just an estimate" and they might genuinely mean it.

[chuckle]

0:13:27.5 MH: Somehow it gets written down somewhere in a plan, and then if it's missed, then people get quote held accountable.

0:13:36.1 KL: Yeah. That's for a fact.

[chuckle]

0:13:36.4 MH: And then it's like, well, I gave a bunch of estimates, but that wasn't designed to hold anyone accountable, and then we see where the trust issue start, right?

0:13:43.8 KL: Yeah.

0:13:47.1 MH: So in my mind, it's attacking a symptom, if we do away with estimates we're attacking a symptom and sometimes that's all we can do perhaps, and certainly, I think we've done a lot of bad in sucking away the capacity of teams from doing real work into doing estimating work, probably too much when I think... Probably the best example of this that pops to mind is David J. Anderson, who's a pioneer, trying to bring lean and combine principles and theory constraints into software development projects. He found he had a pretty dramatic gain in value delivery, right? He dramatically boosted the value delivery cadence for his team of software developers at Microsoft in the early outs, and... But when he presented the details at a conference, it seemed like the biggest gain in throughput came from freeing the team from spending time generating estimates.

[laughter]

0:14:50.5 KL: Wait talking about... talking wasn't helpful to the project.

[laughter]

0:14:55.5 MH: And so, it was interesting because he... Absolutely, there's a whole lot of really

good flow principles and innovations that he introduced... That are still with us today. Anyone that's ever used a task board or flow board or kanban board in any kind of... Certainly in any kind of software development environment can thank David J Anderson for initiating that. But the point here is, were the estimates worth going back to? And that, of course depends. Do I just want people executing knowing that they might go fast or slower depending on people having good days or bad days, and all that? Or is their business value or mission value if you're the public sector from meeting a certain date? Of course, the answer depends, but I think oftentimes, if I have a Black Friday marketing campaign and I miss Black Friday, that's a problem.

0:15:52.5 KL: Right.

0:15:53.6 MH: Certainly, at NASA, if we missed a certain launch window... we might not have a chance to rendezvous that asteroid for another 30 years.

0:16:09.0 KL: Now you're talking about estimates versus the reality of the delivery on that... Let me bring Hilbert in on this. Hey Hilbert, I hear you over there, popping on and off of the audio, you've had a whole bunch of different clients running around, first question was out the door. Might give a short answer, no, don't get rid of estimates, should we even bother with them, cause he said there were commitments, but we're going to need them and it's going to drag value what's your take on estimates, and estimating.

0:16:28.9 HR: Absolutely, I think we should... We should use estimates. And you highlighted a difference Mike between an estimate and commitment, and I've had a lot of experience reminding people that a difference actually exists, and gently coaxing them through a re-discovering the intent of each of those, and that absolutely planning requires that you do both, and that both can be done well... no, apologies or hand-raking necessary.

0:17:09.9 KL: So, it sounds like what I just heard is that... The executive or the stakeholder basically needs to clarify what they are actually asking for, like that... start us out from what you're saying anyway, right. I'm wanting an estimate for these purposes we're going to talk about value from it versus commitments or knowledge that this must be done, it's...

0:17:29.2 HR: Right. Understanding the context and so the importance of getting it right, being able to predict. And as Mike identified that we need to be able to answer the question, do we believe we can get this done before Black Friday yes or no? And on what basis do we say so, another way of coming at this is, given that we need to get this done by Black Friday, what will it take in order for us to achieve that? There needs to be a way to have that conversation. There's nothing wrong with that conversation, and if we have to include estimating in the conversation, then so be it.

0:18:09.7 KL: I'm captured there, by the idea that you're talking about the internal team, what do we need to do to achieve that? And I'm thinking about the original question I saw on this posting, which was, you get your estimates from your Dev team, the question is, what do you tell the client. Because Mike, you went to trust and the role on the team. Right, so in a sense, we're talking from the internal side inside the machine right here, what happens when we're talking to the people that are receiving something from us on the other end, which in a way was the boss, perhaps here we're talking about it from a client perspective, what do you guys think about that? I trust in my team to have estimated correctly such that I can talk to a client about what they're going to get.

0:18:51.0 HR: So, does the concept of having trust between you and the client, scares you?

0:18:56.7 KL: Well, I'm wondering if it's any different than the trust that Mike was talking about on the team, and that's a good point, you have to build trust in other directions.

0:19:05.1 HR: Why do we assume in that that we can have trust there too?

0:19:10.1 KL: Oh, I think we should... I'm just thinking there's so many layers when they estimate to me and then I have to estimate to a client.

0:19:17.0 HR: Right. But all of this is in the context, this is true, this is a real experience or collective experience where it's a given that trust doesn't exist, and it's a given that we can't tell the client the truth... Right?

0:19:31.2 KL: Well, that's an interesting question... [laughter]

0:19:34.3 MH: Well, that's a bit challenging when we elevate the discourse here...

0:19:39.1 KL: Yeah, telling the client the truth, well, you want to tell them the truth, but now we have real commitments happening. Right?

0:19:46.0 HR: And so, what's different? I mean, okay, so, I was just using an example actually, here on my job, where the person said, "Give me an example of what you're really trying to talk about it," and I said, "Okay, let's separate this out." I hope I don't offend anyone here, but there is a family member who is getting married not so long from now, and there is a dress that this family member would like to wear, and the dress does not fit. It doesn't fit, it doesn't matter how much you would like it to fit, it doesn't fit. Now, you can appreciate the value of truth in this situation.

[chuckle]

0:20:26.8 KL: Oh boy, this doesn't go anywhere happy.

[chuckle]

0:20:33.0 HR: But this is the person sharing their perspective of it after they've made a commitment to try to do what they can about the fitting of the dress. And so, to me, that was a really... A positive conversation because all of the change that has to happen is in their control, and as soon as they came to the realization that dress, preferred dress, doesn't fit. I have enough time, I think. I have done my estimating. [chuckle] I think I have enough time to correct this gap, but I'm going to have a back-up plan in case all that I do doesn't come out in terms of the way I'd like it to come out, and I need to make a decision by a certain point as to when I'm going with plan B, yes or no. I was also an audience of the conversation and I was pretty impressed with that, and I thought that it was useful in the conversation today to kind of demarcate the difference between what I would like to see happen and my willingness to interrogate the potential for that to happen, and what information do I have at my disposal, and do I want fraud information or do I want information as close to... I'm trying to avoid using the word accurate or reality.

[chuckle]

0:22:00.6 KL: I think that maybe what I'm asking is, it's like we play... Mike, you kind of alluded this before, that it's all... You didn't use the word magical thinking, but it's like that, it's like a fairy tale you tell. I'm wondering if part of the reason we see so many projects fail, as it were, because defined as missing an estimate in scope schedule and budget, right? More particularly schedule and budget. I was just listening... I'm wondering if that's really the problem, is that we estimate poorly because it is magical thinking of some sort. I was just listening to a series from the University of Maryland's Symposium this year, because we're going to be podcasting on it, and different speakers had some of the more up-to-date information about Project Failure that's being reported, and what's interesting is the needle really hasn't moved. I heard things like 70% of IT projects don't hit budget scope or schedule, I heard that 34% of government projects meet their goals, whatever is defined as their goals, which was outside of the triple constraint even, but only 34 hit them. And so I began to wonder... There was some work in the oil and gas industry, 78% of all projects are over-schedule and cost, 78 missed both of those. It makes me wonder, when you miss it that many times, is the problem we don't perform or is the problem we don't estimate?

0:23:18.8 HR: I say it's more about performance. I think it's more about performance, and I think the better you perform, the better you are you able to estimate.

0:23:29.1 MH: Yup.

0:23:30.2 KL: Oh, you have to tell me more about that. So, you actually think we tend to estimate well, and what happens is we don't get it done. The problem is how we operate.

0:23:40.0 HR: The basis for the estimating is not estimating, we are forced to commit to something that has nothing to do with the process, the methodological process of coming up with a good estimate, and if we don't end up with the answer that someone wants to hear, we're told to go back until we come back with the answer they like to hear, and at some point we give up, and we just accept what... "Just tell me what you want," and that becomes placed as an estimate.

0:24:08.3 MH: The standard, that fairytale comment you had earlier, Kendal, that's now become sort of a standard Agile defense mechanism.

[chuckle]

0:24:14.8 MH: Whenever an executive shows up and knocks on the door of the Agile team room and says, "Hey guys, I could use an estimate on when this will be delivered." And they say, "Well, what version of fantasy would you like to hear?" And they think they're... They're doing a better job defending themselves because they felt the need to do so. However, that still doesn't answer, that doesn't scratch the itch, that the business actually still has a genuine need to know. There is business value in knowing, in many cases, when to promise this, or will we meet Black Friday or whatever. And so, to punt on it, and protect the team, might help protect the team so that they can focus on working, but we still have left this fundamental question unaddressed.

0:25:00.1 MH: So, in my mind, it goes back to... In fact, I remember an exact scenario where I heard an Agile Scrum Master say, "What version of fantasy would you like to hear?", and the executive kind of slinked away, and I ran down the hall and caught up to him and said, "No, I

actually have a valid question that has to be answered, and you're certainly going to have to tell something to your stakeholders who genuinely care about this?", and so let's reframe the question as, "How might we deliver by a time frame that actually is valuable to all of us." And just framing it as that "how might we." I think you used the term... Something like hopeful interrogation, or some kind of term, earlier in this podcast.

[laughter]

0:25:37.4 KL: Yeah, Hilbert, is that what you said? Hopeful interrogation?

0:25:42.7 HR: I don't remember.

[laughter]

0:25:43.2 KL: Anyway. Proper interrogation, for sure. But are we confusing the difference between... Mike, when you mentioned the classic, "Deliver by Black Friday," part of this... I'm wondering if we're confusing the need to estimate... Or our commitments on estimation, versus the fundamental requirement from the business owner, from the business requirements holder? We have to root this in, "This really does have to be done by this amount of time," so to me, that opens the door to your "How might we achieve, and, therefore, what do I need to estimate?" Elements are a big Right? We don't just do this randomly...

0:26:20.2 HR: Steering off with one caveat, right, the people who are setting these targets are used to you missing your previous estimates.

0:26:29.7 MH: Oh, character led in the room.

[laughter]

0:26:32.9 HR: So, they're starting to distort, even the ask, right. It's Black Friday, but they're asking for the 4th of July, right?

0:26:44.8 KL: That's right. [laughter]

0:26:48.1 MH: Yep, yep.

0:26:48.1 HR: So, when we talk... When we replace this with something that's more fundamentally built on trust, you know, let me just summarize it by saying that, where it's not distorted by all of these accommodations for poor performance and excuses and defenses, the system becomes actually more reliable. You become able just to understand what is possible and what's not. And now, you're working against a real gap again, not a phantom of a gap, that's you know, different people have different perception, that's to how much of a gap it is.

0:27:28.0 KL: I like the idea that we're improving the system reliability by embedding the sense of trust throughout the whole thing, and you noted it, that it's... That the executive themselves are gaming the system at the beginning. They're walking in saying, "I know you're about to tell me an untruth."

0:27:44.0 HR: Yeah.

0:27:46.1 KL: And so, if we have them thinking correctly, then we can get every one thinking correctly.

0:27:51.0 HR: And I'm walking knowing that you're about to squeeze me no matter what I tell you.

0:27:53.9 KL: Right, right.

0:27:56.2 MH: And some people believe that that's the best way to arrive at the truth. It's almost like, "Let's have this conflict and see who wins," and then the winner will be something close to the truth.

0:28:06.8 KL: Well, what does our estimate? Tell us. We know that 70% of the IT projects, that's not true.

[laughter]

0:28:12.9 MH: Right, you know what else? The PMI Pulse of the Profession came out in late March with the 2020 metrics on this, what percentage of the time do your projects deliver on their intended business objectives? And it went up for the first time in about 15 years. It only went up maybe no more 10 percentage points, maybe six or eight percentage points, but that's meaningful for something that's been stuck for so long. And it went up the same amount in both government and non-government sectors. And nobody knows why exactly, but I have a strong suspicion if you look at what was going on in 2020, that we all had to get serious about a shift in priority and how to meet an emerging new demand. In the case of say, universities, for example. They had about a week and a half during spring break to pivot to an online format, you're an online university. [chuckle] And you might have had some online infrastructure, or you might not have, but I'm not aware of a single university that didn't find some way to do some sort of classroom instructional delivery by the day after spring break ended. So, I contend it was an improvement in focus, that enabled those success rates to go up. Suddenly, all the projects...

0:29:38.5 HR: That's very plausible.

0:29:39.3 MH: Suddenly, all the projects that had nothing to do with reopening after spring break, were put on hold, and all of our resources were focused on engineering to that one objective. And of course, that's just higher ed. I think we see this in industry after industry, that anyone that was affected by the pandemic, any business or organization had to re-prioritize and quick.

0:30:00.9 HR: And I can back that up with data from previous events when I worked at Boeing. There were a couple of different times while I was there when... And I won't remember the actual events at the moment, but when something happened that was sufficiently different from business expectations that the company issued strict guidelines on priorities for everyone. So, here's the prioritization policy that we'll maintain until conditions change. Here's your number one priority. If you're working on this thing, nothing else is important to you. Here is the number one priority and so on and so forth. And then there would always be some kind of a report out months later that says how fast things move during that period. That happened at least twice during the five years I was there.

0:30:56.2 KL: So, what was the outcome of that though? They said this is the priority and then announced how... After the fact they were able to show how things moved. What was it? Was it improving? Is that what you're saying?

0:31:06.4 HR: Yeah, yeah, yeah, everything speeded up. It was substantially faster. People want a cooler conversation and official circulations attested to working conditions were so much better that people felt universally more productive and we're able to get more stuff done and have it done in a shorter period of time.

0:31:30.4 KL: So, we've just said that ultimately, across the entire stakeholder map, from the people that have the requirements to the teams working as different experts on building the project or the outcome, and the ultimate receiver of the requirement or receiver of the good or service, if you will. If you have trust across that whole network, there is an overall resilience and reliability that's built. That's the first thing. And you guys sounded like it was pretty specific to being able to give a legitimate estimate. Again, Mike, you had the comment... Well, possibly advocacy in a classic kind of judicial process, right? Prosecute and defend the estimate that could go to the truth, but again, our number show us perhaps, but basically, 70% of projects don't hit fail by definition of missing their estimate in the context of estimation. That's what we mean.

0:32:24.0 KL: So, trust is the first thing. And then the second thing, you both just went to is focus. And I heard from focus, Hilbert, you walked us to actually defining the priority. Mike, you talked about focus brought to also priority in the sense that the market in the pandemic shifted our environment, forcing a focus, which was to say, "I priority projects that weren't immediate," naturally, went to the wayside.

0:32:48.3 HR: Right.

0:32:49.1 KL: So, trust and focus. What else helps us get to better estimates?

0:32:53.2 MH: Stability.

0:32:54.1 KL: Better estimation. Stability.

0:32:56.3 MH: And we've come on that. We've touched upon it in this discussion a few times already, but this notion that priority can give us stability is a crucial thing. If our priorities are always shifting, then we're going to have a chaotic environment. No question. And if we're constantly juggling a million projects and having everyone touch them once a week, that's not stability either.

0:33:26.0 MH: So, you work one thing with a focused effort that we know is the right priority, we ask the how-might-we questions, like how might we re-open school online by 10 days from now? And we start to get really creative solutions to those problems.

0:33:43.2 HR: So, Mike I want to expound on what's your calling stability, because there's something that might not be immediately obvious, the casual observer, that there is a word dilution that in my mind works as opposite of focus. Today's practice ends up diluting available capacity infinitely. Alright, when you include all the items that you got to respond to on your personal needs

and then the 15 different projects and that's capital projects, and then the 35 other sustaining our operational projects where people asking you questions all the time, you don't have a lot of your bandwidth left to accomplish anything on the number one priority, right. So, dilution occurs as the default situation, focus occurs when you a load a number of things in play, right? Remove what you shouldn't be working on, so that you can work on the things that you shouldn't be working on, and then that effect of that is that you get concentration of effort. Now when one person is concentrating on one thing... and it's the same thing that everyone else is concentrating on at the same time, then you get a certain synchronization of that concentrated effort so that the outcome is multiplicative, so you don't just get a little bit of improvement on things, you get a lot of improvement in terms of how fast things can move. Now, if you stabilize our own that we are operating, then it becomes almost truly on how to estimate a long things are going to take...

0:35:39.6 MH: Love that, Hilbert. And you know what, I'm going to challenge you to up what you just said even further.

0:35:46.0 HR: Okay.

0:35:48.0 MH: And I apologize if my cat is taking over my...

[laughter]

0:35:55.7 KL: I was going to say I didn't know that you had a baby in the house, man.

[laughter]

0:36:00.2 KL: That is good news.

0:36:00.3 MH: Yeah, me neither.

0:36:01.0 KL: That's a cat, okay.

[laughter]

0:36:04.5 MH: You know Hilbert, [chuckle] I'm going to challenge you later cause I'm going to quiet this cat down.

[laughter]

0:36:10.7 KL: You know what I just heard there was interesting, you said the focus comes from two different areas, flat out reducing what's on the plate, right, the number of projects have to play, the number of elements in play, and then you... what we're talking about here that I think it's practical for a project manager, is the... you said the behavior, our default behavior deludes our attention, deludes our activity our actual work, so you have a mechanism and how many different things where we're operating the mechanism on the number of projects, but the causing, reduction, focus... but then again, we're back to prioritization, I'm wanting... Is it inherent that prioritization tells us what we need to focus on, as a group? You're mentioning that for example...

0:36:54.1 MH: Damn well, I should...

0:36:55.7 KL: I wonder if it's to slip between the... He can go on that one.

[laughter]

0:37:02.8 KL: Hilbert you want to take it?

0:37:04.9 HR: Sorry, I didn't quite hear what you said. Could you just repeat that?

0:37:07.7 KL: Yeah, no, it's the question of, does prioritization inherently drive the focus because I think that's another gap in there, possibly.

0:37:17.1 HR: It's a prerequisite but is not sufficient...

0:37:21.0 KL: Yeah, what else we have to do as an organization to cause that focus to happen once we have prioritization?

0:37:27.2 HR: So just the clear in prioritization doesn't result in better performance, right? We have all been there when they've tried that, but like in the case where we are... in Boeing one day the communication, the policy communication went out in those special circumstances, they literally made it an organization of foul, or I call it a crime for effect, to actually spend your time on anything else, you could be walked out the door...

0:38:00.0 KL: Wow.

0:38:00.3 HR: You can charge your time against budgets, they froze the budgets for the other things, so you are a block from actually applying your time to whatever pet project or... no executives could come in and say, "Hey, yeah, I know that is number one priority, but can you do this for me?" That was just a public execution... Right, so there was a way, a mechanism of blocking, the bleeding of resources unto un-sanctioned activities. Now, there are a lot of people who are kind of... What's the right word? They're hooked on... Like it's a drug. And jumping around all the time. They get bored. So, if you remove things and try to make it so that they can focus their priorities, clear priorities actually works against what they perceive as their self-interest, right? So, some of those people have to be a coach back into more natural habits of focus, but they don't really know how to do that unless you literally put them in the room and close the door and say, you can't come out.

0:39:09.2 KL: It sounds like we've had a breakdown of trust there too, suddenly we don't trust our executives not to interfere or some of our PMs not to be...

0:39:17.0 HR: An apologist, and the body who is listening to this for whom their environment, their mileage is different.

[laughter]

0:39:25.4 HR: Cause I've spent a lot of time... And various organizations where when you really go digging around and trying to find out where the capacity is going, it's being drained on unsanctioned activities.

0:39:39.2 MH: All the time. And I was going to say that we see this pattern over and over again, that we thought we were clear on the number one priority in which people were supposed to be focused on it and which ones weren't, and then we found we had to do something to remove the sources of distraction or like Hilbert said, "the temptations of distraction", maybe...

[laughter]

0:40:00.5 MH: So now that my cat's gone, I want to challenge you on something you said earlier over, Hilbert and I'm going to basically pose as the... What I hear from the agile community a lot, you talked about stability, priority and focus earlier, the agile Manifesto in trying to protect the team. When it works, it does those things and saying, we need a fully dedicated cross functional team, so this is the only thing they're assigned to, they're not allowed to do anything, anything else, it says nobody's aloud to bother them, like not even asking for an estimate. [laughter], cause that's better work, that's not the straight up work, we're removing sources of distraction as well, right.

0:40:43.8 HR: Right.

0:40:47.4 MH: And then, and we're promoting that kind of stability, not just the intact team, but also this notion that the team gets to learn and how to work together, the things that are going on in the organization that might be chaotic and distracting in putting those on the other side of the wall to as much as we can. And so agile solves the problem. So, my question you is, does it really...

0:41:15.5 HR: It depends on what your definition of what goodness looks like for you, in my opinion, the problem isn't just solved by making optimal conditions for the resources if that sacrifices throughput.

0:41:30.9 MH: Yeah, and this is my... This is where I was going with this is, I think when you over-emphasize the need to protect the team, from all the chaos, you're presuming that we can't eliminate the root cause issue, which is the sources of the chaos, and we're attacking a symptom that might work for one team here or there as the best defense mechanism against the chaos, but why do we have to just accept that there's no way to attack the chaos?

0:42:01.9 HR: Exactly.

0:42:03.1 KL: Well, that's tricky, it sounds like that's a default mode, when you just said that I had had like a sinking feeling cause... and I'll speak uninformed by data here a bit, but it seems to me in a lot of the leadership blogs, it's all about how to make sure your team feels safe or protected or understood or have an environmental awareness that allows them to operate as a team with some sense of a shared destiny or shared fate or something, right, and what you just said, Mike, is, to me, that's always raised as the heightened state for a leader, project manager, but you just said, yeah, that might actually be a drug that covers the real problem still.

0:42:45.8 MH: Yup.

0:42:46.3 KL: Right, just making our team more team-like and more protected itself, maybe if removes our eye off the ball. Is that where we're headed? I mean the team may be better off...

0:42:57.9 HR: It does I mean it's a very attractive, kind of nirvana state to put out there as something to strive for, right?

0:43:07.8 KL: What is goodness? Yeah.

0:43:08.7 HR: Yeah, but we're really in business, we're really trying to beat the next guys, right?

0:43:16.8 MH: Then when Hilbert says throughput, I translate that to the cadence of value delivery, which is what most organizations really need, and if... and if we're getting good value delivery, but only from three teams in three areas and only once a year, or maybe one big MVP delivered only every four months or something. Well, what about the rest of the organization?

0:43:43.6 KL: It sounds like our project portfolios, actually need someone who stands a little bit outside of the system to see the system... I'm glad that you came up with that. But that's kind of what you just said to me. Right?

0:43:53.9 HR: Well said.

0:43:55.1 KL: Well, because somebody has... You said something interesting here is "we have to go after the sources of the chaos and distraction".

0:44:04.2 HR: Yes.

0:44:05.1 KL: Which may not just be who's directly causing it, who trusts whom, or how a team is able to respond or defend against that, but actually having to see it as the system you're going after right to find where the actual source is now in this case, Mike when you just talked about it that way, what are the types of sources... Are we back to where the source is the lack of trust, or is the source about how we've established roles for executives and what kind of requirements they get to have, what are your senses guys?

0:44:34.3 MH: I think it...

0:44:35.7 KL: With what underlying chaos tends to be...

0:44:37.6 MH: I could summarize it as when we have a lot of complex work that requires lots of collaboration among people that have different skill sets, even if there's somewhat overlapping, like a good, healthy cross-functional team, we're going to have a situation where trust matters, the hand-off matter the synchronization matters, the answers to the question, how might we do this together get sometimes a bit more complex to try and address.

0:45:07.8 MH: But part of the reason they can be complex because the organization feels chaotic right, and so if we can achieve some kind of rhythm, we can begin to set, alright, here's how we're going to orchestrate the the hand-offs, we're going to acknowledge that not everyone has to be in constant movement, I like the analogy there of... if you go to any high school track meet, you'll see a lot of people standing around. We have athletes.

[laughter]

0:45:34.7 MH: Right, and I actually don't want my fellow relay runner, if I'm a relay runner, I don't want him squeezing in because he thinks he has an extra five minutes to go over and do his pole vault. Like stay here on the track we're trying to get ready for the relay, man... And I think when a lot of managers come into a room and they see a bunch of people standing around like a bunch of athletes at a track meet, they incorrectly view that as people aren't busy enough... No, it's that they're trying to get synchronized.

0:46:04.6 HR: And I'll go further because the managers are one problem, but the resources themselves somehow come into the work place with this idea that they're only delivering value when they're looking busy...

0:46:21.2 MH: Oh boy, we're going to open a whole new can of worms with this.

[chuckle]

0:46:26.8 HR: Yeah, somehow let me make it a little bit more messy and then we can back away from it. I am not one of those people who always constantly complaining about meetings are bad. Right? But it's like a constant chorus, when you ask someone for a meeting, you really describe, Oh... Let's put it another way, "how many people are sitting around this table meeting for an hour? You know much money we're spending in this meeting? So will we spend less if we're all standing around the water cooler"?

0:47:02.3 KL: Well shouldn't we be asking how much value are we driving in this hour?

0:47:05.4 HR: Exactly, exactly...

0:47:07.3 KL: And if we're not, why are we having the meeting? I'm with you on this Hilbert, and this is one of the things... My background comes from the facilitation side, so listeners, that's where I'm coming from. I'm going to put this out here right now, meeting should take as long as the meeting needs to take, which is not what I planned. It could be done quickly, if we're getting to a decision and we're done, and this is a four-day meeting when you thought you only needed an hour, that tells me something else is going wrong, so unless you just have people who literally have nothing else to do in their wasting time, if it's more... I love it when you have a meeting and they say it, by the end of this meeting, we're going to have a decision about three things, and we don't get there right? And it's because everybody was talking, and I don't mean out of turn, I mean it turns out it was complex, and they're like, "Well, Mr. Facilitator, you didn't get me there," and I'm like, "Well, it turns out it's complex." You know what you're right, 14. The answer is 14, like what do you want from me? The deal is your team says there's more complexity, that needs to be addressed, it's about what value you would get out of it, I think... Right? Is what the real meaning of it is there...

0:48:16.4 HR: Bingo. You're right. It does. So, taking it back to the topic that we were on...

0:48:21.6 KL: Don't put it that way.

[laughter]

0:48:26.4 KL: Well, the issue is up to distractions, right? And that... We were talking about people

wanting to look busy, managers needing to look busy, when the team's looking busy, I saw a cartoon today on LinkedIn around some Project Management Forum, there was something like somebody reporting, a Project Manager reporting to someone else, and they said, "So this appears to have gotten done on time and you guys hit your budget," and they're like, "Yep." "And you didn't escalate any issues? Nothing really got escalated," and they're like, "Yeah." And they go, "Oh, huh. That's not good." "Why?" "It means we over-staffed it."

[chuckle]

0:48:58.7 MH: Wow.

0:49:00.5 KL: Right. So, you're right, if you're not in some sort of crisis and constantly churning something... I mean well, somebody got to do the estimates?

0:49:10.2 HR: Right. So how about, we redefine what goodness looks like, and goodness is a design for purpose stable system by design, where heroism is not really something that we condone or having any use for, because the system is... We engineer it, because most of these environments have highly technical people who on the subject matter of their craft are very competent at developing purpose-built systems that work very well. NASA engineers, Boeing engineers, etcetera. However, somehow, we don't believe we have what it takes to bring that same kind of thinking to the way we organize ourselves to deliver this value.

0:50:02.6 HR: And based on my experience, this is so far from the truth. We actually know how to do a lot of this stuff. One of my first gigs when I moved from the shop floor to the engineering world, the manager there were one of my heroes, he made one of the more profound statements that really gave me a sense that I have a place here in this company, and that is when he said, "Hilbert, I appreciate, what you bring to the table, because you bring basic industrial engineering to the design process, and boy, do we need that?" And so, on the floor as an industrial engineer, you're orchestrating the mechanics, the technicians to produce this beautiful product, you yourself isn't touching the airplane you're not adding value to the airplane, but your ability to orchestrate the movements of the tools and materials and people in such a way that this beautiful airplane comes together on a fairly predictable basis, that's money in the bank for the company. And so, when you want to take that into engineering and literally I can tell you another time in terms of the results of that particular effort, when you take that to the engineering and add that to the engineering process, it's night and day difference in terms of how long it takes to develop a new product or the cost thereof. And that just seems to be under-appreciated in these knowledge-work environments...

0:51:35.9 KL: We're in the situation that Mike opened with earlier that it's hard to measure that, like that manager said that to you, but do we have an accounting system for that?

0:51:44.8 HR: Do we take it on an accounting system? The answer is no.

0:51:49.6 KL: No, I don't mean, our traditional... I mean a way of... For that, Mike...

0:51:55.1 MH: Yeah, in fact, this reminds me of a funny comment that our friend Steve Duval had, I think may be recorded in one of your old podcast, Kendal, [chuckle] where he went on-site to some client organization that wanted to improve their project management practice, and they were quite proud that they were world class. They might have even won some sort of PMO of the Year

Award in the recent past, of course, they wanted to keep getting better so they could stay world class, which is why they hired him. But first, let's show you all the things we're proud of, and so he got this grand tour and he saw lots of things that actually did impress him quite a bit, and then they said, "And here's all of our, here's the way we actually track all of our costs, and here's how we keep the thumb on the pulse for cost management and staying within budget and all that sort of stuff, and here's all of our great earned value stuff... "

0:52:49.0 MH: And that completes this part of the tour with the cost accounting department. And Steve said, "Well, that's fantastic. There's just one place you haven't taken me to yet," and they said, "No, no, we've taken you everywhere. Like, you've seen everything." He's like, "Well no, there's still one place I haven't seen," and they're like, "Well what's that?" He goes, "You haven't introduced me to the value accounting department yet."

[laughter]

0:53:15.2 MH: And of course...

0:53:16.1 KL: That's got to be the CEO suite.

[laughter]

0:53:18.0 MH: And that unfortunately is the truth in most organizations. The only people that are actually trying to keep their thumb on the pulse of system-wide value might be the CEO him or herself. And in fact, you talk to those people, and they often throw up their hands and feel kind of lonely with all this, and I think this gets back to alright, I've got all these vice presidents. I've held them accountable to the individual department goals. If they all just met their goals, this whole system would be well synchronized and deliver the results we all want. But of course, there's a flaw in that logic, which is maybe their siloed goals aren't as connected to the overarching goal as you think. And maybe the whole doesn't just add up from the sum of their parts. Maybe there's something bigger we're all after here, and maybe there's a way to actually incentivize people in their own local actions and behaviors to actually help achieve more of the system-wide goal.

0:54:18.1 KL: Yeah, we forget... So much of the project management world I've observed is in decomposition, breaking things down and it's fundamentally Aristotelian that the idea is the sum makes up the whole, right? And it seems to make sense. Break the schedule down, break the scope down, break the benefits down, break the cost down, etcetera. Break the team down in its resource use and be able to reassemble its puzzle pieces, but what that skips is that there are verbs at each of those nouns. That is each of those groups, each of those sub-divisions have different motivations that causes work to happen. So, it's really not just parts of a whole. They're independent jittering pieces, and I think we're going to have a whole new... I'm already hearing today guys; we have some new topics. We're going to have to cover it, some other, so other people can learn.

[laughter]

0:55:02.9 KL: Cadence of value delivery's a big one. Design for purpose is another one, and the other one was sub-optimization cause as a system, I think we're just constantly looking at sub optimization because we view the world that we can just decompose it and it all equals the original. It all adds backed up, and I don't think that's what happens when you have different agents. Each of

those parts are jittering on their own I suspect.

0:55:28.7 KL: Hey Hilbert, I hear you trying to get in on something there, I think.

0:55:32.1 HR: No, it was just me. I'm trying to make sure I'm on.

0:55:38.0 MH: Someone has sounded breathless to me.

[laughter]

0:55:39.0 KL: Yeah, breathless indeed. What we heard today about, it was like the question was around estimation, and that's kind of the tail wagging the dog because what you guys talked about really is is it comes back to focus. There was an embedded trust, and in this idea of focus, we had focus coming from the idea that prioritization has to happen, but that's not enough. It's reducing how much is in play. The actual content reduction is something PMs can think about. Taking more off the plate, allowing the focus. Focus allows us to have better estimation and better willingness to estimate leading to the trust. The other part of focus Hilbert really threw out there was this idea, our default mode is this delusion, this practice of delusion that we do, where our work is itself not focused on what we're doing, and we may even have incentives to be seen being busy, to declare that we're too busy to have that meeting, or I'm too busy being in meetings, I'm not allowed to do real work.

0:56:38.5 KL: And the question is, what part of that is true? When are we doing the work, we need to be doing to get things done? So, these things drove to focus. So, we linked it really to focus. So, a question for you guys, as we wrap up here, for somebody listening to this though, project management, somebody who's not in charge of everything, but is in charge maybe of a project or is the leader of a project, what's one of the first things they could do tomorrow, what do they need to look for? Cause we said, in fact, it might be that somebody outside the system has to be able to see what are the actual sources of distraction cause the answer protect your team, we determine may not be the full answer. What's something that people could do?

0:57:18.0 MH: I would say begin modeling every question with the "how might we start?" Whether you're talking to the team or to the executive stakeholders or whatever, if you frame things in "how might we," magic starts to happen. Suddenly people realize oh, well, I've always had an opinion or two on that or an experiment I'd love to try, but nobody ever asked me. Right, and now all the sudden I'm being asked, and it's not "how come you" or even "how might you?" It's "how might we," right? And then people say, "Well, who's we?" Well, for this purpose, maybe it's just this team here. Well, we can't do that unless our distractors are removed or whatever. So maybe the we is more than just us here. Maybe we have to bring in some people that are constantly throwing more on my plate. Okay, fine, let's bring those people in too. So, in my mind, you can't go anywhere bad. You might stumble across a whole bunch of things that are difficult to solve but asking that right question and promoting that spirit of camaraderie and we're all in this together gets back to that system thinking where Hilbert was saying, "We're great at systems engineering on systems, but not human systems."

0:58:27.8 KL: Yup. Yup, it is an actual business driver, it's not just a feel-good statement. The point is this is inviting people to be thoughtful and own their thoughts is what I'm hearing. It's almost getting back to the concept of authenticity.

0:58:42.6 MH: Well and collaborative, and providing hopefully, that psychological safety. Questions that start with "how come you" don't feel very safe.

[laughter]

0:58:51.0 KL: No, no. No.

0:58:53.3 MH: But if it's, "Hey, that was a real problem last week. How might we make sure that never happens again?" It doesn't have to all be kumbaya and happy talk, right?

0:59:02.0 MH: We could do that how might we own some real intractable problems too? In fact, maybe we should.

0:59:06.3 KL: Yep, Hilbert, you got something for somebody to walk away with for tomorrow to start the process of figuring out this problem chain that leads to better estimation eventually?

[chuckle]

0:59:19.9 HR: So even though there's a lot that needs to be done to improve the working conditions of the individuals in the trenches producing these products, I think we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard than just having stress free work environment. It's not in all of itself sufficient. But we also need to demonstrate that these better conditions are producing more and more of the goodness that the business has been built for.

0:59:50.4 KL: That is so important. So new to me, the idea that we're not trying to achieve stress-free. That was almost a dodge for us to focus on that, and also very hard to do, but it took our eye off. Awesome. Excellent. Well, hey guys, that's going to be a wrap for our first POV Elevating the Conversation Series. So, I want to thank both of you. So, Hilbert, where can people get hold of you?

1:00:14.4 HR: Yes.

1:00:14.5 KL: How can they follow up and ask you key questions that you have to answer or give to me to put on a podcast?

1:00:18.5 HR: [chuckle] LinkedIn. Hilbert Robinson, R-O-B-I-N-S-O-N. First name, H-I-L-B-E-R-T.

1:00:28.1 KL: Excellent. Mike Hannan, how do they get hold of you?

1:00:31.5 MH: It's all LinkedIn these days, right guys?

1:00:33.6 KL: Right. It makes it easier.

1:00:35.3 MH: Yeah. I would just say it's H-A-N-N-A-N. I think I even have a direct link under; however you find individual people. It's just MB Hannan, B as in boy.

1:00:47.3 KL: MB Hannan. Okay, excellent. So, for the next couple of shows, we're going to have

some synopsis of some of the UMD Symposium that happened last month. So, stay tuned to that, folks. But I'm thinking Mike and I, we're going to get Hilbert back in here cause I think we found some new things to talk about: Design for purpose of optimization, cadence of value delivery. Any of these make you jingle-a-jingle guys? I think you like those things.

1:01:09.5 MH: I think you're the organizational design expert, Kendall...

1:01:13.0 KL: Yeah.

1:01:13.1 MH: So, we'll have to challenge you a bit on design for purpose questions.

1:01:16.7 KL: Well, I would like to find that out as well, because I know it matters because just giving a... Well, that's another whole story. We'll have to get that on the next one. I know whatever needs you want to talk to other consultants can drives me nuts sometimes, but I also want to get us to continual improvement at some point cause I know Hilbert's leading the charge on that in some of the space he is now. So PMPs have listened to this complete podcast may submit a PDU claim one PDU. In the Talent Triangle, guys, I don't know. I just realized we started out a Technical Project Management, then we walked our way through Leadership, and then around the Strategic and Business Management. I don't know, what do you guys think? Leadership, Technical or Strategic?

1:01:53.5 MH: Yeah. Whenever anyone asks me that question in the Talent Triangle, it's all the same. "Which one do you need?"

[laughter]

1:01:58.0 KL: Yep, exactly. We have to apply one of them. I'm going to call it Business Management. Get in there and start making sure that your business works without chaos around you. That way you don't have to keep pulling on your team. We'll call it at that.

1:02:10.7 KL: What a ride. PMPs who have listened through this complete podcast may submit a PDU claim one PDU in the Talent Triangle Strategic and Business Management with the Project Management Institute's CCR system. Be sure to manually enter provider code number 4,6,3,4 and select M Powered Strategies. And then manually enter the name of this episode, PM POV 0,0,8,6, Estimations O My. Visit our Facebook page, PM Point of View to comment and to listen to more episodes and get the transcripts. Send me questions, topic suggestions or guest recommendations on LinkedIn or through our website mpoweredstrategies.com. If you send some questions, we'll bat around the answers and maybe make it a show topic. And as always, till next month, keep it in scope and get it done.

[music]

1:03:02.6 Announcer: This has been a Final Milestone Production sponsored by M Powered Strategies.

1:03:05.0 Announcer: I'm out.