

PM Pessimist Optimist Synthesis

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0:00:05.3 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.

0:00:15.2 Kendall Lott: Hello PMs. Well, we are back for another episode of PM Point of View. And yes, I have co-host, Mike Hannan, with me here again today with another special guest about elevating the conversation, and oh boy, are you in for a ride? Just wait for that for just a second. But first, Mike, where are you sitting? And what's the burr in your saddle this week?

0:00:36.6 Mike Hannan: So, I'm back in Bethesda, Maryland just outside the DC area. And the burr in my saddle is, I guess, the disappoint that we, dreamers, often have which is, "Oh man, there's so much inherent potential and why can't everyone see it."

0:00:49.3 KL: I'm with you on that. I'm just coming off a client engagement in Northern California, I am dialing in from Palo Alto and enjoying being out here as I decompress from the client work. And also, the potential is there, when you can help lead them there, it sounds a lot of fun, isn't it? So today we have with us, Ben Damman, as he says, it's the damn man, but it's Ben Damman. And he runs his own consulting gig, his own place of innovation and thought with Alien Tech from the Future. But actually, what he does is product development in the PM world, and he's been on all the big top stuff. We were talking about his bio today, and you'll be able to read about that in the web notes. But Ben, welcome.

0:01:27.4 Ben Damman: Thank you. Yeah, it's great to be here. I'm looking forward to the discussion. I'm in Missoula, Montana.

0:01:36.5 MH: I'm going to be out your way in a month or two, Cody, Wyoming.

0:01:38.6 BD: Oh yeah.

0:01:40.6 MH: Just east of Yellowstone where my wife has a fellowship, and I'll be hanging out in Yellowstone. A little bit on the Montana side too, west Yellowstone.

0:01:48.0 BD: Great. Keep that super volcano under control while you're there.

0:01:50.8 MH: I learned about that like 15 years ago, it was like the biggest bummer I've had in my whole life. "Oh man, the super volcano's going to kill us all."

0:02:00.0 KL: "The ultimate black swan event, don't worry about it. Not in my lifetime. Okay people, here's what we've got here today. We got ahold of Ben because she said, "Oh, you want to shake it up? This is the guy to talk to." And it's not because he's a theoretician, this is a man who since high school has been running his own companies and he's run off with some of the biggest names in the industry. He's been working in places like Apple, he's been at the White House, he's

been with your Medicare system, Medicaid system, sorry. And he's been all over the bureaucracy. If it's about getting it actually done, that's what this man does. That's what he tells us anyway. So, today's episode is going to be optimist, or rather pessimist versus optimist. Where are we at in this whole project management discipline? And I'm not going to worry about why we should care, I'd like to find out where we can hope to go with this. And I'd like to hear the case from Ben on what is...

0:02:50.0 KL: You don't have a burr in your saddle, it sounds like you've got like an entire volcano under your saddle. This is horrific on how you seeing this stuff. Ben, you're trying to get things done, what is it you're seeing in project management that we need to be highlighting and really trying to think more about?

0:03:04.2 BD: From different projects I've been on, ranging from firefighting a dumpster fire in government to just everyday stuff at Apple or what have you, I feel like we treat project management like it's a thing. It's actually a defined named practice. And I have to say, and I'm sure this discussion will probably illuminate this, it's not. It's actually just a broad category of practices and behaviors that we try to apply to organize group output to get things accomplished, but there's a lot of disarray. And so obviously it depends on the context. But I would say I've been in a lot of situations where there are a ratio of five project managers to every engineer or designer, so it's very project manager top heavy. I've been environments where we're building a product, but we lack actual product expertise and we're relying on process-oriented project management, which is not at all the same thing. And conventional traditional project management has been about what you would read about in while getting your PMP certification or what have your scope, all those factors to contain the project and predict, is it going to be done on time? Controlling for all these variables. And there are just so many variables these days that I think that it puts a lot of strain on even the definition of project management.

0:04:23.0 MH: Gotta have fun with you right there, Ben. Kendall and I have had a lot of fun in these episodes, both highlighting where PMI does things well, or at least in the right direction, and where we think they've fallen down completely. But one area where I think they're heading in the right direction is with their latest edition of the Guide to the PM Body of Knowledge. For the first time that I've ever seen PMI use the following definition of project management, they called it a system for value delivery. And I thought, "Hallelujah, a system for value delivery." And you know what? It could be all sorts of ways to fine tune whatever that system might be for you in your context or your organization or for your product or product portfolio. To engineer the most value possible as fast as possible, maybe on the most stable, regular cadence possible, if that's important. So curious to get your thoughts on that.

0:05:10.4 BD: I think that's great; it just sounds like a \$200 word if you mush it together, right? Everyone talks. This is to me, actually, you're teeing this up for me perfectly, Mike, because this is the big problem with project management, it's a bunch of bullshit. It's a lot of lofty ideals where people pay lip service to reality. And where project management is effective, it's when they're dealing with the brass tacks, they're being pragmatic, they're not adhering to some ideology or some choice phraseology. And so, while I'm glad I understand the meaning of what they're getting at, and gosh, I'm sure they mean it, but how does that get reduced to practice? And that is the practice of project management, and I think that's where there's a lot of room for growth. And in a way, we're all under achieving, right? And it's not just project management, it's in business in general.

0:06:00.2 MH: By definition.

0:06:02.2 BD: So, it's like we want to continuously improve, and we want to deliver value, but everyone can't agree on what value is, they don't agree on what delivery is. As we've talked about earlier, one of the big things is, I see a lot of projects that are rudderless, they don't actually have an aim, and so they can manage the project, but it can be at times strenuous because they're not clear about the purpose of...

[overlapping conversation]

0:06:24.2 MH: Yes, just to add an exact example, it's my feeling that to start with things like, it is a system for value delivery, and then prompt us to say, how do we define value, what does it mean in my context, how does it connect to the work I'm doing or trying to flow to completion or whatever? That now we're starting to have the right conversation and deal with the right challenges, whereas in the past, not so much. In fact, a favorite example, a buddy of mine, he's 60-years-old, he got his PhD when he was 30, he's a brilliant guy. He decided to get... Oh, and he's been a professor at the graduate level for program and project management program that I teach in as well, for a number of years, and he finally decided to get his PMP certification about a year ago. And he violated the rules by taking a picture of the computer screen for a question that he just couldn't believe was there. And it was something like a multiple choice, right? "Your job as a project manager is to, maximize the value delivery for your organization, B, deliver on scope, schedule, and cost, C, and," whatever C and D and E were. And of course, the right answer was B, scope, schedule and cost, not maximize value delivery. [chuckle]

0:07:30.7 MH: Now, to be fair, that was the exam he took a year or two ago, so before the seventh edition came out that is now saying, "No, it's all about having a system for value delivery," so maybe they'll rewrite the test now, or at least the correct answer to that question will be different now. [chuckle]

0:07:46.0 KL: But I want to step in here with this, Ben, to ask more about your top point there. Do you believe that the way you said it's more about the ceremony and the ideology, and part is what you've talked a little bit there, it is a project management discipline? 'Cause I have a point of view on that, do you believe that's inherent in the nature and definition of how the discipline is being taught and understood? Or is that a function of market forces about how we are getting employment dealing with market signaling, certification and the institutionalization of the concepts? In other words, is the concept itself fundamentally flawed? Is it a product management problem or a project producing a product? Those are very different in your mind. Is it fundamental to the nature of how we define the discipline, or is there something else that may have manipulated our belief system, our understanding?

0:08:37.3 BD: Oh, yeah, I definitely see what you call the institutionalization, but we're in the era of the fourth industrial revolution, right? Since, not just computers, but software particularly and our internet, network software eating the world, whatever choice phrases you want to use, that has radically shifted in ways we don't even fully appreciate. And as we talked about before, a similar earth-shattering change that the printing press, the Gutenberg printing press brought around, and so that actually reshaped society, like we went from the church being the organizing force in society to the nation state in just a matter of decades. And you can draw a straight line from A to B on that. We have had a similar starting point with the shift in technology and that's changed everything, but

I feel like these practices are no longer serving us, and part of that is because there's a delay to adjust that I think is caused by this third industrial attitude of economies of scale, pyramid shaped organizations, that you need a lot of people and a corporate structure to get anything done because it's hard to coordinate group output.

0:09:44.9 BD: And so, what we have, the factory model, we've defined a professional class, we're going to call them project managers, and we're going to try to make them as the same as possible, right? Regardless of the actual situation on the ground, in the business, because you get certifications, you can tell people they're in college, they can learn this and that. So, creating a professional class does create that sort of center of gravity where everyone gets pushed together and you start creating general rules and generalized business practices, how do we manage the schedule, how do we communicate the order of steps at different teams? So, we have a Gantt chart, those things in some ways are helpful because you can develop a common language for communication, and communication being, of course, a big part of project management, coordination of people in general, but I think when there's such a radical shift brought about by technology in recent decades, our designs for what that professional class looks like, how they're supposed to talk and behave, it's no longer grounded, right?

0:10:49.3 BD: We need to redesign those things given the new situations we have, and that's why you've seen Agile getting plastered all over, but then you end up with things like Safe Agile, which is, in my view, a very bureaucratic, not very agile way of coordinating, and it requires a lot of upfront learning. It's a whole new system, if you will, of project management. And so long story short, we need to update these practices and we need to understand those forces, because I think there's also some generic business forces too, like we could talk about why do businesses care about schedule, for example. But the truth is we often don't know.

0:11:22.6 KL: Hey, Mike, how about that one, why do businesses care about schedule? That's an intriguing question. There was so much in what you said there, Mike, take something there that you are interested in.

0:11:30.2 MH: So, I'm going to answer this like the straight man that I am, and I mean that in a couple of different ways, but genuinely, sometimes schedules matter. NASA, if they don't make a certain launch window to rendezvous with a comet or an asteroid, we won't get another chance for 30 or 40 years. The value to be lost by missing that due date is massive, and we hear examples from the commercial industry with meeting Black Friday, or... I did some work for an organization that does consumer products, and they really had to get the newest razor out to the market a certain time before Father's Day, 'cause that was like half the revenue of the year or something. I've never bought my dad a razor for Father's Day, but I guess that's a thing. So sometimes it matters, but I think what matters far more than the usual due dates that most of us deal with on most project, which frankly is just some arbitrary date that's meant to challenge us and give us a sense of urgency, but most of us know it's arbitrary and therefore BS, and so we pretend to have the sense of urgency that there's nothing behind that date, right? So what I say is that the real role of project management or product management, and I think they're largely overlapping or should be, is to drive up the cadence of value delivery, right?

0:12:44.4 MH: So, the frequency with which we drive an increment of value, and maybe that increment of value is also going up, that is the primary role, and I don't see that really discussed in the broader literature, except for maybe in the Theory of Constraints and a little bit in Lean, some

Agile communities maybe, but even that question of... In fact, I had a client just recently, it's a major streaming provider, they said, "We want you to come in and teach our people how to do Agile..." Of course, there's a lot of assumptions, right? Within that statement.

0:13:12.5 KL: What do you mean by Agile? [chuckle]

0:13:14.1 MH: What's right in your eyes? What's wrong? And oh, by the way, because you're assuming you're right and everyone else is wrong, you're automatically taking empowerment away from your team, which... How Agile is that? So, there's a number of problematic aspects of that, but what I said to them was, "It sounds like you've come at the solution, what's the problem?" And I think that's what you're talking about, Ben, is we're so enraptured with whatever solution or methodology we've codified that we can get, we can sell certifications to or have an army of consultants get expert in, we haven't really discussed the problem as well as we should, and in my mind, usually that's our cadence of value delivery is too slow, either not keeping up with the competition, not keeping up with the times, not keeping up with citizen's demands if it's government, it's not sufficient, and just doubling my resource pool to try and get double the cadence doesn't work, 'cause the human side of things doesn't scale very well, with a few exceptions, if you do it really well.

0:14:08.4 MH: So bottom line is, how do we do it with an existing resource constraints? How do we find the inherent potential that's there, that must be there, that we just haven't experimented with yet and really figured out so that we may all thrive? And I think that's where it can be really unifying. So, when I went back to the streaming company and said, "Is that what you're after? The competition is eating your lunch, you're trying to scale, and as you scale up the people, your profits are going down, and therefore the cadence of value delivery better pick up, or else we're done?" And they said, "Yes, yes, that's it." "Okay, now we've got that..." [chuckle] That's a much more interesting thing to talk about than, "Our people don't know Agile, can you teach it to them?"

0:14:47.6 BD: Right.

0:14:48.2 KL: I want to cycle back up from there, and spot on with that, it's about the cadence, the value of delivery and value we talked about, Ben told me earlier, but Ben, what I heard you say was, there is still a fundamental problem in a sense with how project management approaches its world separate from the institutionalization and the bureaucratization of it, there's some underlying tension in there, and part of it was you related to this idea of technology, we haven't really seen the way technology affects all of us and what matters to us there, and that's what I wanted to push on more and then, Mike, you just said something interesting, I have a note here from Ben from a month ago, who said, "We have so much potential, but we are stuck because we don't use tech properly and we don't coordinate ellipse and it's getting worse." So, Ben, talk to me a little bit more about what you see in tech, and then I'm going to talk a little bit about planning versus coordination.

0:15:41.3 BD: Okay, there's a lot there to unpack. And I also want to play off of what Mike just said, you're making my argument for me. It's, hey, PMI didn't even get their head on straight until recently, right? And this whole thing about increasing the cadence, increasing sort of the flow, or the throughput, however you want to think about it, I feel like when we talk conventional project management it is all about scope, schedule, cost and related things. When you say, "Hey, you talked about the date, we have a deadline." We all know it's bullshit, but we all know that, so we act accordingly. I think that actually is a weird thing to do to people psychologically, and I feel like a

lot of project management practices, and even unofficial ones. So, there's what PMI recommends, there's certainly, I think, things in there that are... Surprisingly undermined the actual goals, but those aren't... Maybe the biggest thing, it's how people actually deliver these things too, so even though the team knows that the date was picked arbitrarily, and the project managers know it, when a project gets tough, people start throwing each other under the bus and they use dates to do it, even though it's fake.

0:16:42.4 BD: And so, when I think about the sort of fakery that goes on with project management is, if it's actually grounded, it's touching the Earth, it's much better and pragmatic about trying to navigate around those constraints, navigate those obstacles that are impediments to flow. And I almost lump that together. When people say, "Hey, I'm really pragmatic." I'm like, "Great, I already understand what I think you mean. You are a Scrum master in a way, right? You're going to help eliminate some blockers, you're going to be reading the tea leaves on what's happening and try to smooth that out so that it doesn't slow us down and we can keep delivering incrementally in the direction we're supposed to," and part of that is making sure we're going in the right direction, 'cause teams can get waylaid, but a lot of the project management behaviors that happen are like an inducement to be playing pretend, to detach from reality, or to have to keep both in your head, "Oh, the date is nonsense," but also, "We got to work real fast, but not really that date, but how do I speak in this meeting?"

0:17:38.5 BD: It's crazy making, and it turns the whole thing into kind of a game of faking till you make it, the points don't matter. And so, I don't know how people psychologically can be even individually well-oriented and have, good sense-making in an environment where you're just surrounded by nonsense that you're supposed to ignore or treat as not definitive, but also comes up in your meetings all the time.

0:18:04.5 KL: We're creating a cognitive load there by following practices instead of working from a first principle.

0:18:09.4 BD: It's dissidence and load. So, when someone adopts methodology, it's both. There's a lot of load, there's a lot of cognitive burden, and it doesn't make sense.

0:18:18.4 MH: And the dissonant load can manifest as actually hurting people.

0:18:23.4 KL: Sorry, go ahead, Mike, you were going to...

0:18:25.5 MH: I was in an environment once where everything that I'd helped this organization do to improve stuff ended up getting thrown aside because the CIO showed up a year later and said, "We're not doing that, we're going to do some Agile thing," and then he violated all the core principles, the good core principles, I like to say, of Agile, that are all about trusting your team and honoring them and being honest and transparent with them, and instead they overloaded them even worse than I'd ever seen by having them take on this overlay technology project. So, while you're doing all your other project work and putting out fires when, you know, our systems that are already live have some hiccups, we're also going to ask you to modernize like every OS and every database and every whatever, and you'll just squeeze that in somehow in your extra time, and within about six months, the rate of heart attacks in that organization quintupled and with some people dying of those heart attacks.

0:19:22.0 MH: And I just remember speaking to the CIO saying, "This is what you have brought." And he was like, "Oh, that's being dramatic," and, "How dare accuse me of killing people?" And all that stuff. And I was like, "Tell me what part of this doesn't come directly from how you decided to manage the load on your people? Tell me what part of this wasn't inflicting pain on people?" And them trying their darnedest to respond to it. "Oh, they had bad health issues and bad diets and bad exercise, and everyone has to be responsible for their own health." Yes, and what did you do to promote that versus making it worse?

0:19:56.2 KL: Well, and being responsible with the health in that context, if it's that dramatic is, yes, they should have quit their jobs, is what I hear you saying, right? Which actually goes separate from the empathy for the people. What I'm concerned with and something, Ben, you'd hit on with me early here is, so what kind of people remain in an organization like that? It's the PMs who are good at the system, so they're about compliance and loyalty. One of the biggest gripes I had working in a Fortune 500 firm was I realized that the words we used for proposals and marketing and engagement with clients from the more senior level was, I won't put in the company's name, but you can fill it in with anyone. We weren't good at doing the cool things that company was known for. The people who were senior were good at being good at the... I'll plug in my own, right? M Powered Strategies, MPS. It would be like one of my consultants saying, "It's not about being a good MPS employee, and making it happen. People around here get promoted when they're good at being good at MPS." And that's the kind of organization I don't want. So, who's left behind becomes one of the problems there.

0:20:58.7 KL: Ben, you'd said something earlier, you're both hitting on the psychological damage. You had talked to us earlier about language, even, which is interesting from someone who's so focused on the product and IT and technical. You're saying that words matter. And I think that was an interesting comment you had, because PMs are supposed to be the big great communicators. How we talk to teams, how we engage, I think is a big deal. You want to play that out a little bit, because I think communication is what we're told we're supposed to be.

0:21:24.9 BD: I think there's a real tendency when I make these brash claims, partly for just playing devil's advocate of project management is bullshit. It's because a lot of the narrative, not just the way we talk about the methodologies and the individual practices within those, but also when we talk about our own projects, it's like, people want to be flowery. They want to sound like they've got an MBA. Like in government, we have acronyms and oftentimes, they make no sense. And they're long. But we need the acronyms in a way because people want to invent these huge project titles that are like five, six words long. And so, you say no, it's an acronym. That's not clarity. I think there's a big difference been doing a lot of communicating and actually being refined. There's something called the robustness principle that I like to refer to. And it actually was like an engineering principle that's often cited as part of why the internet and the web is so successful as an information system. And that principle is essentially be liberal in what you accept and conservative in what you send.

0:22:28.2 BD: So, what that means is, if you think about it in terms of a computer network, right? "Hey, I will try to error correct. I will accept things. I won't just put up a wall and say, 'You have to speak exactly my language before I'll work with you or receive your messages.'" But on the flip side, you yourself want to be concerned to be maybe precise with your language, not over-discuss something. There are things that happen in meetings where meetings just kind of circle. We've all been in those where we can't quite find our grounding to where the meeting is going, and so people

just vomit up information, right? Maybe there's no goal for the meeting. We can point to reasons why it's dysfunctional. But my point here is that we tend to overwhelm everybody with information and new practices and, "Oh, now you've got to modernize on top of doing your regular job." That means you've got to learn a bunch of stuff, and that's about communication. And so, if everyone followed that principle as a coordinating principle of, I'm going to try to boil down what I'm thinking and put it into something that's packetized and something that still conveys what I'm getting at. I'm not losing meaning, I'm focused, and I'm helping other people focus on what matters in that communication.

0:23:41.7 BD: So, I think a great example of doing this is like where Bezos and executives at Amazon, they don't do PowerPoint slides. And they actually get together and spend the first part of the meeting reading the brief, the memo, whatever, that someone wrote to try to say, "Here's what we should do." The same things you'd put in a slide deck. Here's what we did, here's what we should do, whatever, but it's written as a narrative and everyone gets together and reads it at the same time. That is a great way to focus people. Because if you try to do a PowerPoint, people ask questions, and people can get confused, "Wait, can you repeat that?" So that's a way to send information conservatively. And then you have the discussion. And that's what it's, "Hey, anyone can throw any random things. We're all going to be liberally accepting of 'That makes me think of this other project.'" And that might be a total tangent in the end, or it might actually be a really great insight that someone brings. And so being able to balance those things is something where I see project managers are often... There's an inflation of nomenclature, there's an inflation of the thing someone who's working in the project has to now know about, external things like what management wants, and there's this date, but nobody should really believe that date anyway.

0:25:00.2 BD: It's just meant to crack the whip hard on us. That's a lot of cognitive load, and it's not a conservative management approach to keep people focused. And that's why phrases, I think, like divide and conquer become popular, because that's actually about overwhelming people. It actually feels like what we do to people.

0:25:18.3 MH: Yeah, I like that. And in fact, there's a lot of interesting stuff out there on driving change versus driving people. We too often default in traditional PM and Agile, and other places I've seen, too, driving people. A similar sort of analogy is driving flow versus driving people. How might we achieve a faster cadence of value delivery on here together? That's very different than, "How come you screwed up the last release?"

0:25:43.2 BD: And this is about trust too, right, Mike?

0:25:45.0 MH: Amen.

0:25:45.2 BD: I think the way that you can facilitate the flow is if you both have practices in the group where everyone can trust our process intuitively or naturally. And a big part of being able to do that is first being able to trust the people you're working with. And if your project manager is talking about safe Agile and, "No, no, you got to learn this. You got to go to this certification," and all this, none of that has to do with the work, really, and then you create low trust.

0:26:08.0 MH: In fact, right there, you're starting with the assumption that I need to change the people, right?

0:26:12.9 BD: Exactly.

0:26:13.1 MH: "You need to go to training 'cause you need to be changed." I've never met you, I've never built trust with you, but I know right off the bat that you're not what you should be, so go get changed. And of course, that's a killer. By the way, I'm a history buff, and you made me think of two of my favorite moments in the 19th century on this whole brevity thing or being parsimonious or conservative with what you put out, but open and liberal with what you accept in. And everyone knows the Gettysburg Address, or everyone in the US certainly is familiar with it. But what a lot of people don't know is because there was no radio, no TV, none of that, people would often travel hours to hear their favorite politicians speak. And they expected to be entertained for a couple of hours once they finished that trip. They expected a long, sweeping, entertaining monologue that would last hours. And so, the fact that the Gettysburg Address lasted something like two and a half minutes. Like people travelled for hours to go to Gettysburg, where this huge battle had just happened, and were waiting to be effectively entertained and moved for a long period of time.

0:27:15.2 MH: And the reaction for the people that were there was disappointment in part. And it was only later when the sort of power of the brevity sunk in that everyone said, "Wow, that allows us to really focus on what matters. That really captures the essence of this hallowed ground that we just had this terrible battle against our brothers." The other one was when Mark Twain was told he had a tight deadline on something and he turned around massive amounts of content in a very short period of time. They said, "No, we can't use all this. We need something far more succinct." And he said, "In that case, you should have given me more time." That it takes time to really get that level of succinctness together and to collect our thoughts. And I know I can't really do it unless I've written a few drafts and then condensed. Or in the software world, we call that refactoring. Mercilessly refactoring into something simpler and more maintainable and all that kind of thing.

0:28:10.3 BD: And a related part of that is actually attention. So, lack of attention is a lot of reasons why I think a lot of organizations are dysfunctional. They actually have way too many irons in the fire.

0:28:23.5 MH: For sure.

0:28:23.6 BD: But when you think about goal-setting, right? "Okay, what are our goals?" A lot of the same organizations will resist declaring what their goals are because one, it makes them stare right in the face of, "Oh my gosh, we've signed up for way too much." Especially in government, where we've been voluntold to do way too much. It's Congress or whoever and they want to point fingers. But it takes time to have attention and be thoughtful. And certainly to have people change behavior, that is not something you can just tell a person like, "Oh, just think and act like this," and then you expect them to do it, especially when everything in the environment reinforces exactly the opposite.

0:29:01.8 KL: That's the cultural inertia problem, right? Inside the organization. It becomes compelling around the systems of systems. You said something once to me that was interesting. It leaves PMs begging for jobs because they need to find what part of the ceremony they're a part of. Where, "Who can give me stuff for me to report?" It's feeding itself. I agree with you on the goal-setting. I just went through this with a client, who absolutely know what they're up to, but they don't ask this question this way. And what we found was it was exhausting because it's so "simple". It's not. It's very hard to do, and I'm trying to teach and train it at the same time, even as we're

uncovering information. And I think you're right about attention. One of the things that we've talked a lot about here and that I have uncovered or discovered for myself this year is the number one problem of someone in a leadership role is knowing what not to do. It's what you have to hue away. And it was triggered, actually, we've talked before, Mike, from Mike telling me something years and years ago. I asked him if he had one recommendation for me, and he said, "Just getting rid of half your projects. I don't even know what you do, but you're probably at least twice too many, just for starters, if I had one thing to tell you." So, this focus, it takes effort to put the attention on how to figure that out. And we get caught in the system of it.

0:30:11.0 BD: Yeah.

0:30:11.3 KL: Is this PM's problem?

0:30:12.6 BD: Yeah, I think it's a wider problem. But I think if I put on a PM hat, I would suffer from this a lot. How many times do you organize a meeting and you can't get what you need out of it because, "Oh, the meeting's over. Gotta leave." And you've just built up enough consensus or shared understanding, and then it's, "Nope, done." And so, what that means is that meeting, not only did you not get what you needed, but you wasted all that time.

0:30:35.1 KL: I guess on that one. For this reason, everything in organizations to me are fractals. They're literally... Starts from the CEO and direction and vision all the way down, every single interaction is ultimately a little microscopic version of the whole thing. So here is my point with that, how long should a meeting take? And the answer is, as long as it damn well needs to. It should have been built fit for purpose. So sometimes we get this kid situation where people are like, "These meetings are too long." And I'm like, "They need to be as long as needed to do what it should have done." Which is perhaps collaborate, brainstorm, make a decision, whatever the topic is, whatever it is. The other one is, just because it was an hour-long meeting, if you only need 20 minutes, why are we still here? What is going on around here? Right? Now, there may be a relationship needs. So, to me, that's the same problem as the organization suffers writ large. What are we doing here to produce the value? And we should do as much work as needed to get value no more, and don't stop until you get there. My take.

0:31:31.1 MH: Yeah, and the only time I'd ever disagree with that is if it's so time-bound, right? Like the house is burning down, we don't have time to debate the best way to get everyone out safely. We need to just act, [chuckle] right? Maybe we'll spend five seconds or 10 seconds or 20 seconds coordinating that effort, but we better act. So, there can be time pressures where if we kick this around for too long, we will have completely missed the window.

0:31:55.9 BD: One of the failures, I think, of modern business practice is that we reach for the same old tools and mechanisms. So, people are often like, "Oh, we need our meetings to be more effective." And sometimes they shouldn't even be having a meeting, but they lack other sort of cooperative infrastructure, be that the way their tools are set up, or they don't even know what their goals are. Again, I go back to that. It becomes a behavioral pattern that I would say that's not even sort of cultural inertia, it's just inertia of people who become accustomed to operating a certain way. And what I would love to see and I see increasingly happening is we have these Agile experiments, we have other methodologies and ideas that pop up, things like Holacracy. How do you even structure your organization? How do you manage roles and responsibilities? That's a very different approach than a business hierarchy. And so, we have these experiments, and I think we need to start

breaking out and identifying other mechanisms. And then if we all have this attention, it would be great if new people could be hired or you could go to another company, or be a consultant in a new place and everyone knows those same tools.

0:33:09.6 BD: And so, we're not limited then by just, "Oh, we call a meeting or we don't." Or we send an email, or we create a Jira ticket. It's actually, wouldn't it be great if we had some agreement on what the new modus operandi is. I don't think that's necessarily a methodology. I think it's like a set of tools that you apply pragmatically. And I don't feel like we're getting that out of groups like PMI who really have an opportunity to lead there, but they're certainly progressing and advancing too in their thinking. But like, this is actually very difficult work. And again, it takes a lot of attention and when people are busy doing work and doing projects, that's actually not necessarily a great time to figure out the new way of being [chuckle] for projects. And so, I don't know who gets to have the time to figure that out.

0:33:53.4 KL: Isn't it their job to do that? Isn't that the transformation of their own organization is required?

0:33:57.2 BD: But I think there's another attention that I identify. When you talk about Agile adoption, where businesses or governments, whatever they are, they're like, "Gosh, we can't really have self-organizing teams, because they won't do anything." Or they won't do the right thing. But on the flip side, if you have environments where say you have a self-organizing team, but they might be sitting there wondering, "What is our purpose? What is the organization driving towards?" And to have these higher performing, for lack of a better term, or working in a more effective way at a higher order, if you will, of project management, like, what we talk about where we deliver value. Lower order project management to me is like, we're managing with the schedule or the dates. We're cracking the whip, managing people instead of the flow and trust that's involved. And so, higher order project management to me then, you need self-organization. Like the project manager at that point is a part of the team and they're helping, it's sort of a traffic manager of certain things. And they have other sort of roles in that too. But when they're a part of the team, and it's a self-organizing team, which you rarely see. Usually when there's a project manager, it's no longer self-organizing, right? By virtue of, there is an official project manager that tends to be what the organization demands and so on.

0:35:07.4 BD: But if you had a self-organizing team that also had, for example, really good OKRs that tied back to the organization in some way, now people are able to self-organize and they're able to be more nimble and adaptive for environments that require it, and they don't need to be micromanaged. So, I wanted to mention that because I feel like it's an important dynamic in terms of the context.

0:35:29.2 KL: Well, how do you place the PM in that then? Because as we said, if you name a PM, you immediately have a problem. So, let's talk about placing the PM in that dynamic. Go ahead, Mike.

0:35:36.9 MH: Yeah, if you read the Scrum Guide, there's no rule that says, project manager. The assumption is, if you're self-managed, why would you need a manager of any sort? A resource manager, a project manager, skill group manager, matrix manager, whatever. And I argue that there is a legitimate role in most context for a PM type person, but here's how I see it. The whole reason we care about making trade-off between scope, schedule and cost is because we're trying to

engineer a maximum value, right? No one would say, "Let's cut the scope in half, deliver in half the time, but that will also cut the value by 3/4ths." Like, logically and totally, nobody would do that, at least not intentionally.

0:36:20.6 BD: Nobody should do that, but I've definitely seen it.

0:36:23.7 MH: Sure, we all have. But let me stay with this. So, if we say, "Look, there are actual techniques out there that can take some practice, that work in engineering maximum value that your average engineer technician might not care to learn." That's not their career path, that's not their area of interest, it's not anything they want to become an expert in. What about those of us that might bring that expertise? Today, the only role that has that in the standard Scrum guide is the product owner, which is almost like a unicorn in my mind. Like you have to know the customer and the competition and the technology and the methodologies to drive flow, and how to make smart trade-offs, doing scope, schedule and cost? And in my mind, some of that... I've just never seen that. I've never seen one human being that has mastered all of that.

0:37:15.5 KL: Right. But what I'm hearing is that you're saying that in fact that's why we need one because, let's say the engineers shouldn't have to do that or can't do that, and that's where we'll see a failure.

0:37:24.5 MH: Or they could do it, they just don't want to.

0:37:26.1 KL: So, we have the flip side though, it sounds like what you're saying, Ben, is that management and leadership is the problem. It's actually the insertion of the PM. Our actual case we're observing is not that there's too many engineering systems or people who are involved in engineering that dynamic floundering for lack of a PM. It's rather, it's all of our insertion of these ceremonial PMs, reporting PMs, that is actually what's blocking the system. Mike, you're making a comment where they would fit if they were doing it correctly. But if I'm understanding our problem is we've all worked towards being in the way.

0:38:00.0 MH: I don't know that I would be quite that harsh on it. I think I would go back to what I said earlier about, the project management is a concept, it's an umbrella, it is not actually a defined practice. Now, we have groups of PMIs, and I want to take that moniker and call it like, they're using a generic term to try to say, this is the official way to do a project management. But that's a linguistic trick, right? It's not the only way.

0:38:21.4 KL: They are selling a product.

0:38:23.2 MH: Oh, sure, sure, sure.

0:38:23.7 KL: That is a particular business is what's going on there?

0:38:26.4 MH: That's what I think, and that's what I'm saying, it's just marketing. Take the ocean for yourself, if you can own the term, you've got a trademark and everyone uses it generically, like Kleenex, that's still beneficial. That's actually great. But where was I going with this? I think that there's a real question, like, at the US Digital Service, there was a time when I was there where it seemed like we had a lot of designers and not as many engineers. And so, the balancing act of what is the composition of a team that will be best suited, best configured to deliver on a particular

outcome or accomplishment that for the organization. I think that by creating a professional class of project managers, it does then crowd out other things and the paper is over, what do the product managers actually do? 'Cause we're basically debating like; how do we want to define project management? And if you're an optimist, you're like, oh, here are all the great things, the little functions, and the big functions that they perform. And if you're a pessimist, you're like, gosh, these guys just get in the way. And they're just involved, but they're not necessarily contributing to the outcome, and they're just in the way, and also, they're confusing me. I thought this was what we were doing, but now they said it a different way, and then they're talking to management, but somehow, we're not able to the same way.

0:39:35.5 MH: So, we're all now operating from different information, and I was thinking of like Theory of Constraints. And I feel like when we say project management, the word management is in there, and I actually think that one of the dysfunctions in business is that we have a lot of actual management, actual executives, and they try to outsource their job to genericized "project managers." When really these do fundamentally become issues of flow. We want to optimize the business. We're not trying to optimize the individual team in isolation, that's a terrible idea.

0:40:14.0 KL: Amen. [chuckle]

0:40:15.4 MH: I'll maybe be nicer. Because we have an overabundance of Project Managers, I'm thinking of like California DMV, is because the rest of the leadership has actually abdicated their responsibility. And then they get caught up in the ceremonies because they're just looking to be busy, right?

0:40:30.6 KL: Let me ask you, is the role of a Project Manager possibly could be driving accountability, causing accountability? And I don't mean of the team they manage, but I was about to ask, of the leadership that has requested something. And now when you said it that way, it's almost like, "You outsourced this to me, I'm not letting you get away with that. You're the one that's accountable." I'm wondering where the role of the manager is in this, or the actual management, the executives.

0:40:54.4 BD: Well, I actually think it's one thing to outsource and say, "Look, we're going to..." You can look at it this way, we're bringing in Project Managers, seasoned Project Managers. I almost think, based on this discussion right now, tell me if this is crazy, but it almost seems to me like the best Project Managers that I've worked with are actually not managing the team, they're not even necessarily managing the work, they are managing the management.

0:41:17.5 KL: Delegating up is the job of anyone in the middle of a hierarchy. Absolutely.

0:41:22.4 MH: And I remember one time I was managing a giant program early in my career. I didn't have time to do what I would consider, the good project management work. "Let's actually analyze scope, schedule, costs, trade-offs, in order to maximize the value we can deliver." I didn't have time to do it, 'cause I was always managing all the politics and the stakeholders and all that. So, I actually hired a Deputy that could do the real goodness of it. And again, it was in service to the organization's goals that were then formalized as this project to go help achieve them. So, like you, Ben, we started off thinking we might have this sort of pessimist versus the optimist, I think we're bringing on a lot more than we imagined. Ben, you could be the magic maker.

0:42:02.4 BD: And it could just be, yeah. Part of what's wrong, I think, with Project Managers is the title. Again, this is like title inflation, trying to over-complicate things to sound fancy in our businesses. I think back to California DMV, and some of the Project Managers actually basically did the planning before any engineers or myself got there for how this was supposed to go. And it's like, how do you plan a software-related project without any software developers? These are general Project Managers. And so, the other... I guess, if I were to go back earlier in our discussion, one of the critiques I have is that oftentimes Project Managers, because they're not specialists in technology or whatever is the germane skill set that the work represents, it could even be like manufacturing plants. If you have a general-purpose Project Manager, they're not going to understand things that they might learn from theory of constraints, right? Because they're just a general-purpose hired guns. But what tends to happen is that the Project Managers are out of touch with the actual capacities and abilities of the team, so the goal-setting also gets all wacky.

0:43:04.5 BD: And so, I like this idea, maybe because I had it myself, but that the Project Managers are there to actually manage the project in the direction of management, because that is the theory of constraints that Goldratt talks about in several of his books, how management is the problem, no individual contributor can truly fix these problems. And yet we as an individual contributor, we will try, we'll burn ourselves out sometimes, and I have to remind myself like, "No, I literally don't have the sufficient position or means to actually do this. I can influence, I can raise attention to it, but that's it, I can't fix it." And so, if Project Managers would focus their pressuring, I'm just going to say it like that, on the management, get your story straight. What's our narrative? Why are we organizing the teams this way? Do we have the teams composed properly, in terms of skill sets? Is it the flow that we want or need even possible? Those are management problems, why is it that an engineering team suddenly becomes coerced into thinking about cost? That shouldn't be their concern.

0:44:11.4 KL: Right. Yes.

0:44:13.7 BD: That's a management matter, leadership problem.

0:44:14.4 MH: Absolutely. Sorry, Kendall, we're agreeing too much.

0:44:18.2 KL: I know. Okay, so here we go. Lightning Round on... What I want to know is, what is practical that somebody could actually take away from it, besides thinking value cadence, but some of these lofty or organizing principles, what can our PMs take away from this, knowing that they're stuck in the middle? And we've heard this from other guests as well. I hear something coming from Ben.

0:44:35.9 BD: Real quick, I think there's a couple of things. For anyone who's new to project management as a career path or whatever, I think the biggest thing is, you might worry about what you don't know. There's all these methodologies, all these certifications, you feel like, "I got to know all this stuff." And in a way, what you need is probably the piece of paper, because if that's your career path, people look for that, certainly in government and a lot of different types of contracting. But I would say you're actually at an advantage, because what you can learn to do is learn, basically, well, learn how to "read the tea leaves" in social settings, and those sort of soft skills as they're usually referred to. But also, you have an opportunity to figure out what project management practices, or just let me remove that, what practices work in context in situ with what you're dealing with. And you can have an opportunity to draw from these things you learn about.

But I wouldn't want anyone to walk away thinking, "Oh, I'm new to this, but I have to learn all these things. I have to learn the theory of constraints, I have to learn..." You don't. It's actually much simpler. These are just things that can help you leapfrog ahead. But you're early in your career.

0:45:40.5 BD: The other thing I would say is, I need the seasoned Project Managers to stop being... If they lean towards being pedantic or highly structured and all of that, in an environment where that isn't actually helpful to the organization. And they probably know this because everyone hates them. They feel restriction. [chuckle] If you're launching a space station, and you have physical constraints, and you have to adhere to a schedule, and even though they have a lot of money into it, you've got a very tight budget, really. That does require a different kind of management. And I don't know, I almost feel like maybe, what people who are pursuing project management. And I think this is reflective in both of... You guys think in terms of management, it's really not project management that you contain yourself with it. And I think I would encourage all Project Managers to think of it that way. They are managers. They might not be supervisors in the way that a typical manager or director is, but they are managing people and the work and the flow. It's a management position, not Project.

0:46:39.6 KL: Mike. Yeah, something practical.

0:46:45.0 MH: I like all that, and I would see your bet in anti-up even further and say, your real role as a project manager is to drive flow, and you say drive flow of what? Well, drive the flow of work toward our shared objectives. Well, what's our shared objective? Let's be clear on our shared objective and make sure that's understood, and if that needs management, great. And then I actually like heading the project, I think it is special and different compared to other types of management because what we're doing is finding what hopefully is a disciplined, reputable, fast way of driving change, right? 'Cause every project exists to change something, and that's how we're trying to get value, that's how we're trying to thrive as an organization and as a society and all that stuff. So, you're driving flow. You're driving change. You're not driving people. And I think any kind of manager in a project or product context understands that, then the whole notion of servant leadership makes a lot more sense.

0:47:42.6 MH: I'm not just supposed to be Mr. Nice Guy, and I buy pizza for the team or whatever. [chuckle] Yeah, yeah, I am a servant leader. I am in service to a larger goal that we all share, and not to driving you as human beings, because I presume you came motivated, but there are impediments to our progress that will happen, and somebody needs to make that their primary focus to clear those impediments. That's me, somebody needs to create the right environment that gives you guys the ability to focus on the work at hand, either in a collaborative context or a heads down solo or both. I need to maximize how those conditions are created so that you all can do your best work. And by the way, some people love to juggle millions of tasks, they're ADD, they like to cherry pick, they get bored with stuff easily, they don't finish what they're doing before they pick up something new, those individuals need to be coached on how to actually get stuff done or find somebody that can take it to completion, effective, quick aside, and they are trying to rap this up.

0:48:39.7 MH: This is sort of a fun story. I had a client once that had this, it was a software development organization, it was one of the best I'd ever seen actually, fantastic managers and architects and developers, user experience people better than I've ever seen, and it was in a government context, so they had one guy that was like lightning fast, he was this awesome teen, he was faster than everyone at cranking out code, nobody knew how he did it, and they just watch him

work and it'd just be like mind-blowing, like how can I even type that fast, and he's just flowing code out, but the code was really buggy and had massive quality issues, and they said, "Dude, it's okay if you slow down and just give us higher quality stuff," so he would, and then he was like the slowest coder because he was constantly checking himself and it just wasn't how he flowed, and we tried 5 or 10 different things that none of which worked, and so I'm like the most useless consultant or coach ever. And then finally, this one junior dude on the team said, "I've been looking for an excuse to work more closely with that guy to just learn how he does what he does, and my primary role is actually QA, but I also code so I can actually find the quality issues as he's generating the code and fix them, maybe as fast as he can turn out the code" and they did that, and together they delivered five times more value delivery than either of them working separately.

0:49:57.7 MH: So, the punchline here is, that's not a project management technique, that's not an Agile Scrum technique, you can't even really call that parent programming, not really, but it was an experiment that the team felt empowered to try to drive the flow and achieve the shared objective, and they had 5 or 10 other experiments that they felt empowered to try, which all failed, but they kept trying until they found something that worked for them at that time.

0:50:25.3 KL: Got it. And now I'm going to do one last thing here I'm going to start introducing is a segment for us because of what we talked about before, all of this is about change and it's a fractal, right? The big stuff we're after is what should happen at the smallest unit of work that we do as far as I'm concerned, so I'm going to ask you a gentleman on the following, and I'm recommending this to all of our listeners. This is how I work on some of the stuff I do in consulting, we just spent an hour together, hour and a half together, an hour on this show together, and there's a presumption that that wasn't a total waste of time. I could be wrong. Here's what I would like to know from the two of you about yourselves, what can you do, what do you know, or how do you feel differently than you did an hour and a half ago when you entered this Zoom call? Or this team's call?

0:51:05.5 MH: Well, I'll go first.

0:51:07.4 KL: What can you do, know or feel, what's different boys? Talk to me.

0:51:09.1 BD: I feel like I have a better way to leverage project managers when I encounter them, which is to direct them towards a lot of these management issues.

0:51:19.0 KL: Thank you. Do you know or feel differently?

0:51:21.0 MH: In my mind it's more of just identifying when the practices and tools or techniques are getting in the way of driving change and driving flow and being smart enough to discard the things that we didn't say it on this call but, Ben, what I heard, loud and clear coming from you over and over, lots of your example was "You are here by empowered to use any or none of the techniques that you just learned." So, like when you said like, a new PM has an advantage, [laughter] right? They don't have to decide which ones to discard, they could just pick one or two that might work and just go with it.

0:51:51.9 KL: When I actually have just... I haven't known. It's something I feel like I know more. I claim a I know on this, which is as we sussed out that there's problems in the PM world and the institutionalization, the bureaucratization of it, and we're looking for a role for them properly, Mike,

PM Pessimist Optimist Synthesis

your last comments have put a nice point on it to me is, I'm wondering, as that secondary coder helped out, if a PMs job is helping to define the problems that the team faces such that they're empowered and able to solve them themselves, it's not just reporting or solving it.

0:52:22.8 KL: Love it.

0:52:22.9 BD: One aspect might be, I'm seeing where there's a problem because that's what the engineers, the prime toners are not paid to do, particularly, they could be that pair of eyes where I've seen something. So now I'm thinking, PMs, my learning today is I want to be able to focus on being able to generate a problem statement, we talk about a guide, but even for a team, here's what I'm seeing. That might be helpful. That's where I'm stuck. Gentleman, thank you for your time today. I know we have a hard stop.

0:52:52.8 KL: Well, well, whether you're a pessimist or an optimist or are desperately seeking new role, and don't know what side you're on, if you've listened to this whole episode, you can go to ccrs.pmi.org/claim and scroll to the fourth banner around the left column, online or digital media and manually enter provider code number 4634 and select Empowered Strategies. Then manually enter the name of the episode, P M P O V 0099 PM pessimist, optimist synthesis and select Strategic and Business Management in the talent triangle. And with that for another month, I co-host, Kendall Lott, call on you to keep your gin up, keep it in scope and get it done.

[music]

0:53:40.4 Announcer: This has been a final milestone production sponsored by Empowered Strategies.