Robert Barger

# The Law of Change

A Guide for Project Managers

**Essay**

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## A Guide for Project Managers

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# The Law of Change

# Lessons for the Project Manager

## By

## Robert Barger, MBA, PMP

## **Summary:**

Questions about a decision made during the course of a project can arise at any time. These questions can be prompted by new information that raises doubts about decisions made previously. Documentation is the key to being able to sum up the inputs and the timeline. By capturing information regarding what resource provided what information, and when, you can quickly provide a summary of events for senior management. Without such documentation the project manager can find themselves the subject <u>of</u> the investigation, rather than in a position to help provide factual and detail information <u>for</u> the investigation.

## **Introduction:**

7.6 Billion years from now, science tells us that one of two outcomes is likely as a result of our sun becoming a Red Giant. Either 1) Our sun will expand past the orbit of the Earth, engulfing the Earth in a fiery embrace that will kill off all life on the planet, or 2) due to the dramatically decreased gravitational pull of this new Red Giant version of our sun, the Earth will spin off into the cosmos and, deprived of the warmth of our Yellow sun, become a floating ice cube, again, killing of all life on the planet. (Appell, 2008)

7.6 Billion years is quite a long time from now, but what happens if we find out that the scientists made a mistake? What if it turned out to be 7.5 Billion years instead of 7.6 Billion? Any resource that wasn't used in moving us off this one planet would be called into question by the generation that suddenly found their time was up.

<u>Today's good choice can easily become tomorrow's bad choice based simply and easily upon the acquisition of new information, or a change in circumstance</u>

The scenario above is of course an extreme example of how a situation can change, but the point is, everything is subject to change. Financial, Political, Merger, Reduction in Force, Divestiture, New Technology, Promotion, Demotion, and any other number of changes to the business landscape can result in a review of previously agreed upon decisions. How many of us have been asked to account for decisions and actions that were made on a project that ended only 6 months ago? 12 months ago? How many of us have been asked to review decisions that were made in an earlier stage of the current project?

<u>Every project manager should expect to be asked to justify decisions they have made.</u>

It may not necessarily be because you have made a mistake. It could be because new information has been added to the equation or even because a more senior member of management who is not as familiar with your project is simply asking questions about the project and its status. In my tenure I've seen Project Managers lose career momentum, and even lose their positions within the organization, not necessarily because they made poor decisions but because <u>when the time came to justify their decisions they were unable to fully articulate the thought-processes they used</u> and the inputs they had at their disposal at that time. The impact to their career momentum can then depend on the gap between the outcome of the previous decision and the current view of that decision. What happens next after you get called to the carpet is a product of:

1) How badly that past decision is viewed in light of the new information,

2) How well you are able to call forth the inputs used at that time, and

3) How different those inputs are from the new inputs.

Yesterday's decisions are viewed as beneficial, or detrimental, based on Today's situation, or outcome. A decision is a point-in-time choice made by using a combination of:

1) Inputs available today,

2) Experiences gained from Yesterday, and

3) Expectations about Tomorrow.

## For Consideration:

1. "Good" and "Bad" decisions can undergo review based on any number of influences including: new information, legislative, financial, and political changes, and can come from internal or external sources.

2. Unless Yesterday's inputs are available for discussion, only Today's inputs will be used in the assessment of a decision

3. The ability to provide clear justification for Yesterday's decision can greatly improve the position of the decision-maker within the context of Today's discussion about that decision

Therefore……….

# The Law of Change:

# *A "good" decision lasts only as long as the inputs used in making that decision*

## A "Good" Decision Defined:

It's all about perception, right? A "good" decision can be defined as one where the outcome was viewed favorably, one that others agreed with. You make a choice using inputs, you explain the inputs and the choice to your supervisor, and your supervisor says "that was a good choice". They say that because given the same information, they themselves would have made the same choice. They agree with you.

A "good" decision could even be a "mistake" that had favorable results. How can a mistake result in a positive? Let's say you are a manager for a retailer and have been assigned to close the store that night, but you forget to lock the front door. That night the store was robbed. Video cameras showed that the thieves were well prepared to break through the door, but since it was unlocked they didn't have to. The value of the merchandise stolen was less than the cost of the repairs that would have been required. This saved the owners of the store thousands of dollars in repairs and provided timely support for senior management's argument that improved security was required. This was a mistake on your part but was viewed favorably.

# A "Bad" Decision Defined:

A Bad decision can be defined as one where the outcome is viewed unfavorably. This could be a decision that lead to what is seen as wasted effort, extended timelines or missed opportunities. This could even be a decision that was in line with all known policies or procedures yet since the result produced an unintended or unfavorable outcome, it is considered a "missed opportunity to show some initiative", or some such performance coaching language.

In short, a Bad decision can result from choosing poorly and reaping the properly unfavorable result, or choosing wisely yet reaping an unfavorable result. How can proper actions result in a negative result? You are the quarterback on your football team. The coach calls a Pass Play from the sideline. You throw a beautifully executed pass and hit the receiver right on target, but the receiver drops the ball and it is recovered by the other team. You are the leader of the team, and it was you that threw the ball, the decision was correct given all the inputs but the outcome was not favorable.

## Why does it matter?

Let's be honest, the "Blame Game" is real. Another game that's real is called "Hot Potato". When a senior manager asks you why you made a certain decision and you can quickly provide details on the situation, dates, and names of those who provided you the inputs you used to make your decisions, very suddenly you can find that not only does the uncomfortable attention shift away from you, but that you can also gain a reputation as someone who can provide answers, someone who is organized and on top of things.

No, you are not using the information to point the finger or pass the buck, you are simply using this information to shed light on the subject and to provide some color to the discussion. This information can be useful in building a root cause analysis, or in reviewing policies, or systems, or someone else's career prospects (just not yours….)

## Conclusion:

You don't want that conversation with the senior management to turn into an awkward moment. One way to avoid awkward moments is to gain <u>consensus and approval</u> on the decision. Yes I know, in the long run having more people join you in being wrong doesn't ultimately help make you right, and it doesn't necessarily relieve you from your responsibility to lead,  but with consensus and approval you gain additional viewpoints and advice. Having more viewpoints analyzing information is simply better than having a single viewpoint. It's a wise man that gathers the advice of many before acting.

Having acted, your decision is still only as good as its inputs. When asked about a decision you made two hours ago many of us can quickly call up the inputs used to make that decision. When asked about a decision you made two months, or two years ago, few of us would be able to quickly recall those inputs. <u>Documentation is the key to being able to sum up the inputs and the timeline</u>. By capturing information regarding what resource provided what information, and when, you can quickly provide a summary of events for senior management. Each of these topics (who, what, when) is critical to being able to provide details for a root cause analysis. Each of them offers a clue. This documentation could be in the form of emails, or meeting agendas, but for speed of access I personally use a journaling process that is searchable by keyword so I can quickly scan for specific subjects.

I have found journaling valuable in being able to provide a quick succession of bullets that simply, and succinctly provide Who, What, and When inputs that lead to the decision being questioned. With professionalism you can state the simple facts of the issue and allow senior management to make the determination if the input provided was inaccurate or premature. If nothing else it can also provide a contact for additional follow up. At the beginning of my professional career someone told me it doesn't really matter what decision you make as long as you can support that decision, the important thing is to be able to make that decision.

## References:

Appell, D. (2008). The sun will eventually engulf earth--maybe. *Scientific American*, Retrieved from http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-sun-will-eventually-engulf-earth-maybe

## About the Author:

Robert Barger MBA, PMP is the author of *Sam The Cat: A guide for memorizing the 42 subprocesses using Mnemonics and Memory Stepping Stones*, a manuscript utilized by the Central Ohio PMI Chapter to assist students in preparing for the PMP examination, as well as *Lessons for the Project Manager from French and Raven's Bases of Power*. Mr. Barger has been in the project management field since 2001 and has worked in a wide variety of industries and settings. Mr. Barger is currently working as a Principal Consultant for a Central Ohio technology solutions firm.

Deuteronomy 8:17-18

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