BLOG

5 Top Problems with Project Management, Part 3: Breaking the Cycle

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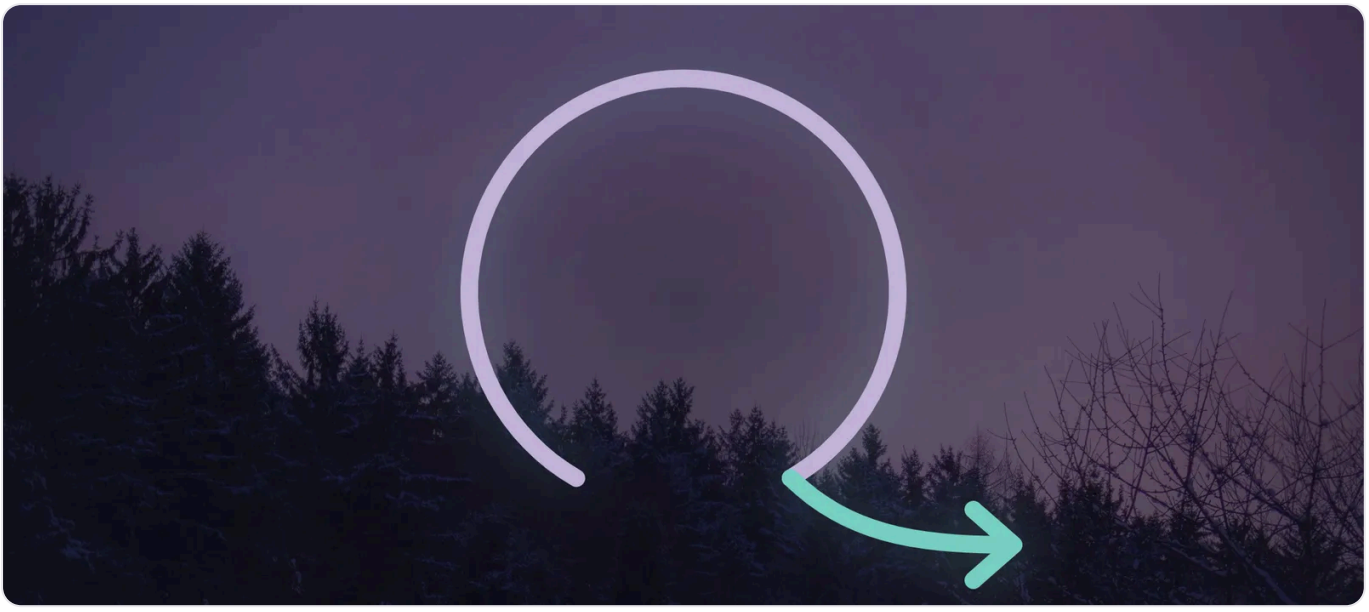
Jay Goldman December 4, 2017



This is Part 3 of a series on the top problems with Project Management Tools. See Part 1: Old Tools, New Rules and Part 2: The Illusion of Control to catch up.

It's not going out on much of a limb to say that the role of Project Manager in most organizations is frustrating. It can quickly feel like an endless cycle filled with what Lean experts might call 'waste'.

1. Start by building **a project plan** that no one looks at.
2. Spend lots of time **trying to get people to look** at it, including drastic steps like printing it out on many sheets of paper and sticking it up on walls. Give up.
3. Spend the rest of your time trying to get **status updates** to keep the project plan reflecting reality. Feel like a hamster in a wheel, chasing that dream. The struggle is real.
4. **Wrap up** (hopefully) on time and (hopefully) on budget. Reflect on your project plan, which now looks more like a rear view mirror catalog of all the times your had to adjust the plan instead of a

view out the windscreen at what this project could have been.

5. **Do a post mortem.** Have everyone agree that the process is broken when everyone doesn't follow it and that it won't happen again. Shake hands, knowing deep inside that behind everyone's cooperative smiles is a desperate need to leave this meeting and go back to not following it.
6. **Rinse, repeat.**

My intent is not, of course, to have all the PMs reading this in tears. Perhaps I should have prefaced this post with a warning. Instead, my goal is to point out the futility of the place we find ourselves today, sadly attempting to change the future without learning from the past. **It's time to break the cycle!**

I'll preface this section by saying that I fully expect to get some pushback from PMs who object to any part of their process being labeled as *waste*. In an optimal world I would tend to agree. The role of a PM is to deliver a project on time and on budget, maximizing the success criteria defined at the project's kickoff. One might argue that any activity that moves the team in that direction is high value.

Unfortunately, we don't live in an optimal world. As we covered in *Part 1: Old Tools, New Rules*, and in *Part 2: The Illusion of Control*, we're using tools and processes to try to control projects that exist in a radically faster and more agile world than anyone who designed those tools and processes could likely comprehend. Keeping that in mind, it's much less of a surprise when you realize that many of the steps you take day-to-day might be deemed wasteful in that they fail to add value to the project or help make it any more successful. **A modern day update to the age-old Zen koan: "If no one looks at a project plan, does it still control the outcome of the project?"**

Many of you will be familiar with the Lean manufacturing system, which came out of the Toyota Production System (TPS) and was famously adapted into the excellent book *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries. Lean helpfully defines several different types of 'waste' that can occur in the manufacturing process, some of which can be borrowed to explain the PM cycle described above. There are three types of waste (muri, mura, and muda), but we're specifically interested in the third:

Muda (??) is a Japanese word meaning "futility; uselessness; wastefulness", and is a key concept in lean process thinking.

There are two types of Muda, known as:

- **Muda Type I:** non value-adding, but necessary for end-customers.
- **Muda Type II:** non value-adding and unnecessary for end-customers.

We often serve two levels of customers as PMs: our **internal customers** who are working on the project and our **external customers** who are receiving the end result of the project. In both cases, much of the busywork that makes up today's PM efforts (complex project plans no one follows, endless status updates no one reads, etc.) could be labelled Muda Type II.

To get a little lower level, there are seven types of Muda that we might focus on, often remembered through handy short forms like TIM WOODS (leading to generations of self-conscious operations experts named Tim Woods).

1. Transport
2. Inventory
3. Motion
4. Waiting
5. Over Processing
6. Over Production
7. Defects

The relevant ones for us are *Inventory* (making stuff that sits in piles either between steps or after all the steps are done), *Waiting* (the time that stuff sits in piles between steps), and *Over Processing/Production* (spending time and effort on steps that don't add value recognized by our internal or external customers).

Consider your detailed project plan that lives in Microsoft Project on your laptop. Since many of us are knowledge workers, the concept of Inventory may seem surprising. It's not like we're cranking out widgets in a factory! Except we are. That project plan is inventory. So are your status reports. They are

the output of the work you do, and so the more inventory you build up that isn't directly useful in driving customer value, the more Muda you have. Now think about the handoffs between everyone in your project's path, critical or otherwise. How many times does someone end up waiting at those handoffs because the team one level up the waterfall hasn't finished? More Muda. Lastly, think about the over processing that happens when you take your eye off a task and the team involved gold plates their requirements, or misunderstands them, or just plain does more than they needed. Muda.

"Okay, fine." you say. "I'm knee deep in waste. But even the time I've spent reading this eloquent post has created more waste. How do I break the cycle?" Glad you asked. Three deceptively simple steps:

1. **Stop trying to manage.** As we talked about in Part 2: The Illusion of Control, you aren't actually in control anyway. Understand that your role is to orchestrate the team and you'll let go of many of the Muda tasks in your list.
2. **Get a living plan.** It's time to evolve away from a static project plan that only gets updated when you make changes to it, which no one on the team ever sees. Move to a tool where the collaboration happens inside of the plan so that it gets updated as a byproduct of the work getting done. (Yes, we happen to make a tool like that: Conductor.)
3. **Automate.** There's a surprising number of menial tasks that are part of orchestrating a project to completion. Find those tasks and automate them so that you take the human error and wait time out of them. Consider things that are highly repetitive (e.g. setting up a new server), highly error prone (e.g. copying data), and highly boring (e.g. status reports).

Those three steps aren't going to unlock some magical PM paradise (sorry!), but they are going to help you break the cycle and evolve toward a future of orchestration and a much, much smaller pile of Muda.

Frequently asked questions

What is the project manager's cycle of waste?

The six-step loop the article describes: build a plan nobody reads, spend effort trying to get people to read it, spend the rest of the project chasing status updates to keep the plan matching reality, wrap up, hold a post-mortem where everyone agrees the process is broken, and repeat. Each step is real work that adds little to the outcome.

What is muda and how does it apply to project management?

Muda is the Lean manufacturing term, from the Toyota Production System, for activity that consumes effort without adding value. Applied to project management, it covers much of the plan-chasing and status-gathering work PMs do. Type I muda is non-value-adding but currently necessary; Type II can be eliminated outright, and the article argues much of the PM cycle is Type II.

Is a project manager's work wasteful?

Not by definition, but often in practice. A PM's job is to deliver on time, on budget, and to the success criteria, and anything that moves the project toward that is valuable. The problem is that tools and processes built for a slower world turn a large share of PM effort into activities that don't help the project succeed. The article's test: if nobody looks at the plan, does it control the outcome?

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