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**AoP Newsletter: All project evils are caused by ignorance.**

1 message

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AdamOnProjects Newsletter

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31 Oct 2024

**AOP Newsletter**

This edition: All project evils are caused by ignorance; German language help needed to overcome Monty Python trauma; PBPL on sale with new Second Edition in the works.

Projects and Knowledge

**All project evils are caused by ignorance.**

Many projects, if not most, are hopelessly bloated with practices, procedures, tools, and techniques that are not needed and add no value. At the same time, some bloated projects fail - at the most fundamental level - to do the needful.

## Every Project is Vulnerable

This is true regardless of the lifecycle approach, methodology, or software application that drives them. There's nothing unique about Agile and Plan-based projects that prevents teams from taking on this practice and tool overhead they then must carry, and which steals productivity, progress, and personal well-being.

There are a range of reasons for this practice focus, not the least of which is the rise of professional organisations and certification authorities, who inevitably need to prescribe concrete practices that can be learned and examined..

## All evils are caused by lack of knowledge

We can boil all these reasons down to one "first cause": ignorance. Organisations, teams, and individuals lack the knowledge required to pursue project goals efficiently. Their solution is to attempt to replace this missing knowledge with practices.

David Deutsch described his "principle of optimism" as ***"all evils are caused by a lack of knowledge"***.

More importantly, he gives us the way forward ***"there are no limitations, other than the laws of nature, on our ability to eliminate evils by creating knowledge."***

Projects are basically a knowledge-management exercise: marshalling team knowledge to wrangle knowledge of the problem, solution, and context. Digital/virtual products are especially so. Pretty much all project failures are caused by a lack of knowledge.

If you view your projects through a knowledge-management lens you have a far better chance of successful completion.

Btw, I wrote a yarn some time back about "Predator Helmet" filters, which summarised an academic paper on perspectives on projects. "Filter" #4, the Behavioural View, emphasises human interaction and

knowledge management. Check it out: ["The Project Manager's "Predator Helmet": Nine diagnostic filters for project practitioners"](#)

## **What Knowledge to Leaders Lack?**

At one level projects are extremely simple things, but they often operate in a complex environment. There are some extremely simple levers that project leaders can (must) operate to get the best out of their projects.

The fundamental knowledge leaders need is how to:

1. Identify what's really important.
2. Bring people together.
3. Select and apply the optimum tools and approach.

At its core, "Identifying what's really important" involves understanding the value equation of the project. What problem are you solving and where/how can your customers/end-users capture value? And how do you balance Business Value with End-user Value? This drives easier decision-making and prioritisation. Internally, understanding what Values and Principles your organisation, team and individuals deem important.

"Bringing people together" is obviously about marshalling a team of people who can work smoothly and cohesively on the important stuff, ignore the non-important stuff, and get on and do the work. In a world of buzzwords like "Collaboration", it's remarkable how few folks know how this works. Sometimes, and this frequency increases in larger enterprises, project teams are an assembly of specialists flying in close formation, and their allegiances are to their speciality, not to the team.

And lastly, "apply the optimum tools and approach". If you have the first two sorted, this area of knowledge is a much smaller deal and easier to work through. This applies both to the technology being used to build the solution as it does to the workgroup tools and ways of working the team uses.

How much of your project team's time is spent debating ways of working and tools? How much freedom does your team have in selecting these, or are they imposed by your organisation?

There isn't anything else a Project Leader needs to focus on.

If you come to projects with this perspective you ensure that you have the necessary knowledge that avoids most project evils.



## Practice Selection

Of course a project needs some form of practice consideration, even if tacit (the kind that "Ri"-level practitioners have in doing without thinking). So a critical activity in any project is practice selection.

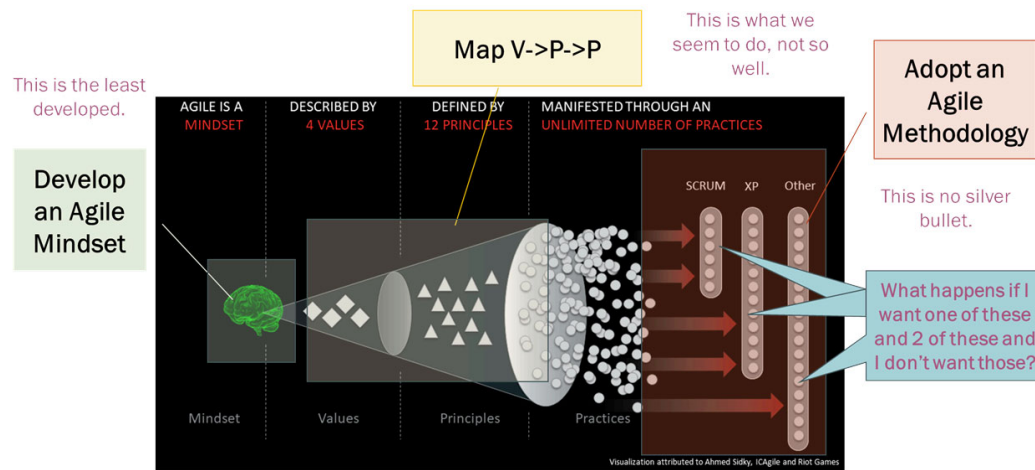
There are four practice selection strategies:

1. Directly from a mindset (tacit practice knowledge)
2. Mapping Values to practices via principles
3. Choosing a Methodology, which packages up a bunch of practices
4. Choosing practices directly, using your own criteria

Which one do you use in your projects?

Projects with the "practice bloat" problem usually use strategies 3 and 4. Strategy 1 is rare and, despite 20 years or more of both traditional and agile worlds preaching the importance of driving practice selection from values and principles, many project organisations misunderstand or ignore this approach.

There's a fairly well-known graphic about Agile by Ahmed Sidky which shows the relationship between mindset, values, principles, and practices. I've adapted this to illustrate these 4 practice selection strategies.



## So, what's a Team Leader to do?

The first thing you need to do is become fully aware of your situation. Do you operate from the foundation of Values and Principles, or is everything tactical? If this isn't something you think about explicitly, be aware that as a human being you are doing so, but the Values and Principles are tacit and not immediately visible to you. You should perhaps cogitate a bit to figure out what is important to you. If you need a framework for this, I suggest the [Spine Model](#), which I'll write about in the near future.

The second thing you should consider is looking at what you're doing in your project(s) - the processes, tools, methods, techniques, and artifacts - and asking yourself some critical questions:

- Why are we doing this?
- What would happen if we stopped doing/using this?
- Could it be optimised?
- Are we doing it right?

Ultimately the basic question becomes **"What knowledge do I need to add to solve this project problem?"**

## The Bottom Line

If you have a team of experts who just "do the thing" without too much discussion on practice, tools, and methods, then you're in a great

place. Driving your practice selection from Values and Principles is the next best thing.

This is one aspect of gaining and adding knowledge to your project's context, which can only help.



#### Book News

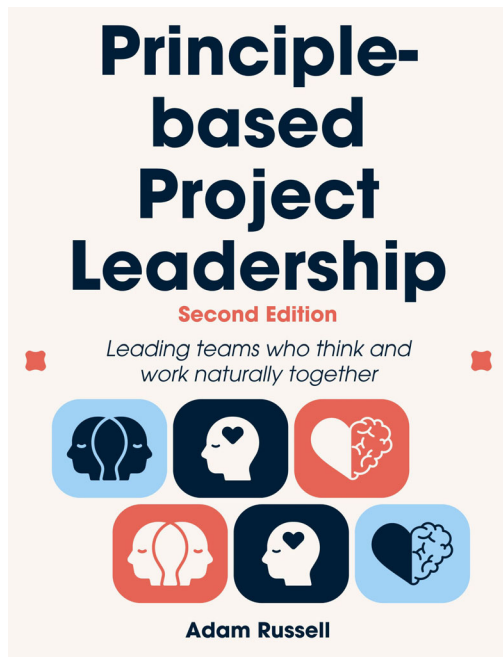
### Project Teaming Principles (German Edition)

#### Help needed! Project Teaming Principles (German Language Edition)

[Project Teaming Principles](#) is a light-hearted look at what drives good teams. My publishing platform offered me a free translation to German. Why German, IDK, but of course, I said yes! The only problem is that I don't speak German, and I'm hesitant to press the "publish" button for fear of "my hovercraft is full of eels" or "come back to my place, Bouncy Bouncy!" Yes, after so many years I'm traumatised by a Monty Python skit.

If you're a good German speaker, I'd be very appreciative if you could just read a couple of paragraphs to do a sanity check. I'll happily compensate you for your time with a free copy (of either English or German version - or even both!)

If you can help, please reply to this email.



## Book News

# Principle-based Project Leadership

## PBPL On Sale and 2nd Edition in the Works

Since we're talking about Value and Principle-based practice selection, I'm in the middle of a complete rewrite of my very first full book: [Principle-based Project Leadership](#). It's on sale this week at [Leanpub.com](#). The old First Edition is what's on offer during the sale, but you'll be notified of the Second Edition and can download it straight away once I publish. Like any first thing, it's undercooked, but you can get it at a great price, with the much better and bright shiny new version coming soon.

Stay tuned.

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