

Recording.

**I loved your writings in the internet and I loved the book you sent me for reviewing, "Let it Simmer: . No commonplaces, no mainstream - even when mainstream writing pays more than the ideas that make you really think. I think that your approaches, however, bring much more actual value to customers.**

I hope so! I do know that many of the people I've shown the early drafts of the book to have said that this really resonates with where they are in their experience also.

I think that there are probably a great number of project managers that haven't shared this experience because they're in environments that are stable and mature and so on. But at least in my experience and probably yours - because we are consultants -, we don't get called in to discuss things with companies or organizations that are in that place where everything's working fine. So my perspective is from those organizations where they're having difficulty getting Project Management started. You have to take that into account.

Having said that what was interesting to me some time back is that Gartner, for example, found that most of their clients, which is most of the major companies around, are on the second, third, fourth iteration of trying to do a PMO at all. So it's not just small companies trying to get off the ground, it's large organizations who are also having challenges with that. So it seems to resonate pretty well, because so many people are having this experience.

**You aren't dealing with platitudes, are deeply concerned about the efficacy of organizational change actions but sometimes I suspect that very few people actually cares about efficacy at all, and prefer to just do the chores and that's all . How do you *feel* about this? (Should we do this one off the record?)**

I would even say it on the record! In fact I do say it in the book.

What I found in consulting with commercial companies as well as with the government, is you get to a certain size - maybe six hundred people or something- where the top executives are kind of insulated from what actually happens financially-. Now if you're very small like a start up, you've got six or eight people and if things don't go well then everybody's laid off, and the founders are probably not even paying themselves a salary yet anyway. So they feel the impact. When you've got a large number of people and a big organization, then when things don't go well, you know what happens by and large: the people involved with that project are laid off, maybe that business unit even gets closed down as a failure, but the top executives at the company are given other roles and they are still there. "*Well sorry about that, let's just try something else*". They don't really have any incentive to change what they're doing.

**I think that when the water reaches the neck of the proper people, that's when they begin to care about lack of efficacy, and perhaps middle management is unwilling to escalate bad news.**

**Do you think or feel like there's some kind or formula for successful strategy execution?**

Well of course there is never a guarantee! A bad idea is still a bad idea.

So let me answer for a more specific situation. The reason that I put together the *Let it Simmer* book is to provide a formula for getting something done when it's not clear that the organization really wants to do it. And it's much like Agile project management, you know, part of it is fail early and take

small steps and prove successes early. I think there's a very great possibility for an initiative that if you simply decide to do it and jump right in with both feet and put reasonable resources against it, still it can fail. Because it may not be well thought out. If the initiative has enough resources behind it and enough executive support behind that, it could succeed eventually by just sheer brute force. If you pour enough money into something, something's going to happen. But I don't really think that you can completely count that as a PM success.

### **So why do so many people write and teach about the 10 secret keys to project success?**

"Secret keys" is the point, isn't it? That basically says that the conventional wisdom isn't going to get you there and you need the secret knowledge. Actually I don't see so much of that, maybe because project managers are a pretty down-to-earth group and not so subject to marketing gimmicks.

What I see is a lot of writing and teaching about the best practices. Of course, there is always a place for best practices writing. There is value in saying "*companies that are large and successful, mature and established do these things*". And so when you get there one day, this is the kind of thing that you're going to want to be able to do.

What most of those books don't tell you is how those companies got there in the first place. And it usually wasn't by starting off with hundreds of pages of documentation and trying to do that. I think they got there over time, and you don't read much about that. Mostly I think because the leading authors in the project manager in space are either folks who are selling PMP preparation exams, which means you pretty much have to go for the best practice. Or they are people who are large consultancies or selling large tools, so they are selling a methodology that would work if you had enough people for a long enough time to make it happen, but it's not really in their interest to make it happen *quickly*.

### **I very, very recently began to think that maybe this strategy execution business should be oriented to negate the ways to failure instead of insisting in *success formulae*...**

I think part of the problem is not that organizations intend to fail but rather that they don't really understand what succeeding is going to look like. If you have an organization that doesn't really do project management or any of the other governance things, then the managers don't really know what it is that they want or how much work it might take to have it.

I think managers do try to block off failure by bringing in a solution that can't go wrong, for example by asking for best practices and by bringing in a large consulting company. If you buy from one of the big international consulting companies and have them do the work, then as a manager you cannot be criticized. If those guys don't get it right then it must have been too hard for anybody to do.

But that's the problem: those companies by and large are not designed to deal with this kind of situation. As it turns out that's not the safeguard against failure; in many cases that's the *cause* of the failure.

**I began to think that way not two months ago. After a coaching I did in Bogotá I began to think to myself "I don't think there's a sure answer for success, I don't think that most projects will succeed. That's quite negative! I need a positive way to express this understanding". So I began to think in terms of negating the ways to failure, and minus times minus is plus, you know. But I'll bite the tongue before telling anyone that there's a sure way to success.**

**Ok, let's go back to our conversation: what you think has been the relevant progress toward**

## **success in the actual PM profession in the last 20 years?**

While as a profession obviously it's exceeded very well. I can remember when P.M.I. was not that big of an organization and now they have hundreds of thousands of people carrying the PMP designation. They've convinced governments particularly and also some quite a number of corporations that people need to be professionally trained in project management. Those are good things. I think it's at a crossroads right now and has been maybe for the last four or five years with the rise of the Agile approaches.

There's no reason that agile can't co-exist with project management. But in many cases the organizations that are adopting Agile (at least in saying the words, anyway) are doing that because they think it means they don't have to do all this project management. That has happened because the PM profession hurt itself by somehow generating the idea that in order to be a successful project you have to produce tons of paperwork. Now we're going the other direction where people think if you just say you are Agile then you can basically just do whatever you want and that's clearly not correct either.

Lately the PM profession has done a pretty good job of trying to adopt and integrate the agile concepts. . What you're seeing now is that people are realizing that Agile, as represented by Scrum, for example, which at least in the US is the leading form of Agile, doesn't work much past the individual project level. You still have to have all that program management infrastructure behind it. And from the opposite end, traditional project management is working out how to incorporate those Agile parts. I think it's going to end up when they meet in the middle and we end up with pretty much the same thing we had in the first place.

The bigger problem is that the people who really understand Agile are starting to have doubts about that too. That was really how I realized what the *Let it Simmer* book needed to be about, when [Jeff Sutherland](#), one of the founders of Scrum, started to talk about how they're starting to collect data on projects now where the Agile-based projects are not having much better of a track record than the waterfall-based projects. And I thought "*well, that's a little scary! Now what?*".

And I think that if we spend too much time talking about how Project Management doesn't work, then people will start to believe that, too. I do believe it works. But it doesn't work if the organization does not hold the basic values that make PM work, and it takes time to change an organization's mindset.

**I wonder if the basis for failure resides in a underlying, common layer for both Agile and Waterfall, and they both are blamed for something that's not solvable from a methodologic level...**

There is a small body of literature out there. I used to attribute it all to Kik Piney. He's probably the most current person doing it, but lately I have read some articles dating back to 1979 on this. They call this problem the *Anti-Maturity Model*. That is basically where the *Let it Simmer* book goes.

I can't say this enough, I'm not against best practices. Best practices are good once you get to a point where the organization is capable of adopting best practices. But to do that you have to have some concepts in place: the concept of accountability, of establishing clear goals and objectives, where managers believe that if they're given resources then they're expected to produce whatever it was the resources were for. Without that it doesn't matter whether you're going to do Agile, whether you're going to do Waterfall; you're not going to have success very often, because the manager does not feel it necessary to deliver whatever it was that the organization expected them to do. So

2015-10-3 riglav and dbrownpm

success will be random. Some managers will succeed because they're good at what they do; others will not succeed. But the process has nothing to do with it at that point.

Remember as consultant, we're not seeing the whole universe; just the places that have problems. What's really surprising is the enormous number of entities that have been in this game a while and still have problems with PM.

Let's be realistic here. If somebody is asking you to set up a PMO, unless it is just getting started as an organization, then you already know that the situation is going to be a problem. I mean, this project management business has been around for six or seven thousand years now. If you've got an organization that hasn't got it figured out yet, it's not because there's no books on project management. It's not because there's nobody trained in how to do project management. It's because the organization itself by its culture is really not ready to take on that level of accountability.

Dealing with those problems is where the *Let it Simmer* book is aimed at.

**I loved the concept behind simmering. It think it requires a hardened spirit, a doses of temperance, patience, kind of structural self-integrity, for you are purposely restraining big, showy results, instead delivering small ones and incrementally building the whole change the organization asks you to make...**

All of this is ironic that I would be the one writing a book about that topic as I tend to be impatient. You go into a situation like that, you know and I know what needs to be done and internally I'm thinking "OK, come on let's get on with it". It's not just government projects, people always talk about how long it takes the government to do stuff, but any big bureaucracy is like that. And there are times when you think "gosh, it's taking me six months to do something that should take six days!".

After a while you learn that yes, you could do it yourself in six days, but nobody's there with you so you're a band leader without a band. And it's better to go ahead and take that time as long as you're not being fooled into thinking that something's happening. Take the time that's needed to bring some people on board and let the change be their idea.

**There's a sentence by [Manfred de Vries](#) I use often in my presentations, "The only one who wants a change is a baby with wet diapers"**

We always think people don't want to change.

That's not always true. That's why we have T.V. Remotes. In that case, people want so much change so fast that they want to change the television and flip through all of the channels without even having to get up from their chair.

I think people are often happy to change! People change all the time. We **would never have popular culture without that, right?** For a week or two, some artist, some restaurant, some book is popular; three months from now nobody ever heard about them again.

The real quote is "People don't mind change; they don't want to be changed". I don't know who said that, I Googled it and lots of people use it but nobody gets credit for it.

I'll admit that I'm that way, I'll do almost anything until you tell me I have to do it, then I don't want to do it, even if it was something I was going to do in the first place.

So in an organization that needs to adopt governance practices of any kind, telling them that they have to do it is just another way of delaying the process even further.

What I say in the book is, try to bring them along by getting them to do things that you want to do in order to solve problems that they wanted to solve anyway.

What you have to be careful of is that is not just a disguise for not doing anything, and what I found is that if PMO directors are just getting started with a new PMO, the first three months, four months, five months everything's wonderful. They're talking to people, everyone says "*Yeah, we should do this, this is great*". So the PM goes off to build their policy document, they build their templates, they get these Web sites ready to go. Maybe they even have some meetings to get input on doing all that, but meanwhile nobody else is having to do anything different. So everybody's very supportive.

Then the day comes when the PMO moves from writing policies to actually doing something about them, Now they start to impact on you as a line manager. "*Hey, let's talk about your projects. How are they doing against the baseline, all that sort of stuff. Now we can see if they're late and if they are then we will have to report you*". All of a sudden the honeymoon is over.

Now you can head off some of the conflict if you decide to take it in small steps and do things that people will accept. You have to take a big enough step to show that you are going somewhere, because otherwise you're just taking such little tiny steps that everybody says "Look at that fool PMO over there in the corner, dancing around in a circle by themselves", because you're taking it so slowly that nothing's really happening.

### **I'd want you to describe the cornerstones of your *simmering* approach...**

I know in Argentina you don't have any tough meat, it is all wonderful meat! to me. But for the rest of us, there are some kinds of meat, brisket for example, that are not as high quality as others. If you say "*oh I'm just going to take it, and throw that on the barbecue to cook it right now*" then all you get is burned meat on the outside and inedible meat on the inside. So you put it over a slow fire, in a pot of water, and cook it for a long time until the tough part gets melted away and now you can have food that is just as good as what you had hoped the barbecue was going to be.

And really that's what the simmering analogy is about for governance. If you take an organization that is not ready for change, and you try and force a change either too quickly or too big of a change in one time, all it's going to happen is that a tough situation will get tougher. You don't want to cause a fire by trying to push this through in confrontation with the people who are there, because they were there before you and they will be there after you are gone, even in the best of situations. And don't forget that they are the ones actually getting the real work done; you are just this bystander with a clipboard, so they are going to win most of the contests.

If they really think that you should leave them alone because whatever they're doing is working for them, then it is much better to bring them along to cooperate. Unless you've got some huge external reason, they have no real reason to do this. You're just going to make everybody mad; they're going to find ways not to do it, and eventually they're going to throw you out. So it's kind of a high risk situation both for the organization and for the person.

So what is in the Simmer System™ is using collaboration to build a mindset of accountability in an organization that is not really prepared.

The principles are already laid out. You alluded to integrity. If you give up on that as the PMO and

you think “*well, in order to make friends I'm just going to actually change the truth*”, that's not going to work. Because first of all they're going to hold that against you. Sure, it is convenient for them today, but they'll remember it differently next year. And they will say “*well you know those guys can't be trusted. Look, they make stuff up, they're changing numbers*”.

We also have what I call *the pasta principle*. Basically it means don't worry too much about the order of doing things, just do something because of the way project management works with the iron triangle being all linked together. If you just set a date, sooner or later the other stuff will come with that because now you can ask “*Well, OK so what's happening with that date*”. And now all the other project management pieces come with it.

One principle is doing what you have to do, if it helps. If somebody doesn't want to manage the contracts because they think that's beneath them, “*that's just administration*” then take it off their hands, because now you get control of some of the truth. Which is what they haven't wanted you to have.

So beyond the principles, getting into the things the PMO can do to move into the actual execution, then we have the components of what I call *gathering*, which is gathering the data that will expose the inconsistencies, and then *working cooperatively* with the line managers and the owners of the projects, to get them to agree to do the things that eventually will grow into a project management practice. A lot of those things will come from obvious contradictions that come out of the basic data gathering.

For example in gathering you can come up with a list of priorities which somebody has published somewhere. If there is no list that tells you something right there! But let's say there is a list and nobody's working on that, well that tells you something, too. And those are the kind of things they understand without anyone having to point fingers. You say “*OK so I was looking at this list of priorities the other day and I don't see where anybody's actually working on this stuff. Is anyone actually doing this?*” Eventually people will come around to asking themselves the same question.

The good thing about looking for the list is that you're not asking anybody to change what they're doing: you're just collecting information that already exists. But as we lay out in the *Let it Simmer* book, as you start putting one list on the table, they'll say “*Yeah, that's what we published*”. And then you put the list of ongoing projects on the table at the same time. These two lists are different. Now you can just stand back and watch. And now the managers themselves will figure out what to do with that, because either the list of things that they're working on becomes a new priority list, or somebody says “*yeah we need to do this priority stuff, so we need to change what we're doing*”. But you are the PMO; you're not doing that you're just standing back watching what happens while the line managers move the ball down the field in the direction you wanted to go. Hopefully.

### **How do you maintain the tension in the project, so the project does not become invisible?**

There's a project and then there's the enterprise.

I don't know that you can move a project along that in that way, using the Simmer System™. You can't do just the bits people want to do (and that's certainly not what Agilists had in mind either).

So the Simmer System™ is not really aimed at the individual project. It's aimed at the organization and its capability to do effective management Projects (note the plural), programs and portfolios.

It's not about walking up the steps of a maturity model. It's about changing how the organization

thinks. At the ultimate level, to me that means that the maximum level of maturity of project management is that the PMO goes away. There's no need for a PMO if the organization is fully mature. Because all the managers understand that if I give you money you're supposed to do something with it. And you argue for the money in the first place based on "*This is what it should cost me to do things, this is how long it's going to take, here's what you're going to get when you're done*". I don't need to have a PMP to know that kind of thing; that's basic management stuff.

So at the project level what I find is that if the organization can get its act together enough, even at just the similar level to say "*So what is it you're working on? And when you think you're going to be finished?*". I think you could have that conversation and get the manager to commit to just the real basics of the iron triangle. "*OK You gave me this much money. I have a thing I'm supposed to do and an outcome I have to produce. And I have a tough time, and I know we're expecting to meet not step by step, but in the end I want to launch next spring*". Mostly the projects take care of themselves after that point. There's no shortage of people that understand basic project management enough to make that happen. For example. if I have a project going and I have some level of commitment, and an issue comes up that cannot be resolved within the project team, **in an immature organization what happens is, the issue just festers**. Nothing happens. They complain. If they do bring it up the organizations responds in a really bad way: "*Quit complaining. Stop making waves, just get out there and do your job. Make it happen*". But nothing will happen. Because there is no organizational process for dealing with obstacles.

So I think that at the project level you're absolutely right; you can't you can't do a project at one quarter speed.

(I'm loving this conversation!) **Why did you write the book?**

You know, it took shape over quite a long time. About eight years ago I was talking to Rita Mulcahey's team about writing a book on program management and project management. They were interested because I was bringing a bit of a contrarian view. I felt at the time that there was something missing with the books that were out there with the best practices, because no engagements I was working were doing those things and I kept thinking. "*Maybe I should write a book about how people are really doing this stuff!*"

So I started doing that, and I got a lot of it written, but in the end I felt that it wasn't going to work if it just provided processes and templates for how to do things differently. But it was going to be much too long if I also had to explain why these would be different from the best practices. So I lost the momentum on it, but fiddled with it from time to time.

Not so long ago, actually, I went to a meeting that I've mentioned earlier where Jeff Sutherland was the speaker about Agile and the state of Agile today. And the summary of his talk was: "*This was what we saw in waterfall, and that wasn't working. "So we invented Agile and built Scrum. Now that we are starting to see enough data on that we learn that's not working all that much better either!"*". That's when I realized: if you've got an organization that is working properly, waterfall would probably work; if the organization is dysfunctional, then Agile doesn't work either. So the problem isn't the medicine. The problem is the body is rejecting the medicine. So we're trying to jam a medicine that is perfectly good by itself into a situation that's not appropriate for it.

I thought "*that's why I need to write this book!*". Because all the books that are out there about how to do best practices, how to do large scale project management. And the ones that are about how to do smaller scale project management are about how to use basic stuff like to-do lists. I realize that's what I've been working on is putting project management and program management, portfolio,

enterprise architecture; those kind of things into organizations that didn't have those practices, not because nobody knows how, but because the organization wasn't really ready for that. And once I realized that, I looked at four or five or six of the engagements I had and they all had more or less the same outcome.

In the end it took me in some cases a little while working with those organizations to figure out how to get some forward traction. But as I look back at them, later, I realize "*Yeah, in the end they all kind of work out about the same way. So that way, the one that works out in the end, that's what my system is*". Later on I named it the Simmer System™

### **Wonderful and down to earth. What you think are the 3-5 risks that could make a serious PMO project fail?**

People have been talking about risks for a long time. I think you know PMI recognized, not so very long ago, maybe two or three years ago, that projects were not failing because they didn't have good Gantt charts. It was the people topics that would go wrong.

Now you're seeing PMI, for example, put more focus on the soft side. You know the fellows who run the IPMA certifications have been arguing this for a long time, that a good project manager is not about the tools. Tools are a given; the key question is whether you have the people skills necessary to run projects effectively?

To me they're the reasons why a full scale proper effort to do a PMO will fail.

First of all, the organization does not have the culture that we've been talking about. If the culture does not value accountability, you basically what you have is a kind of a medieval structure. And it still exists here in the twenty first century. There's plenty of that going around still. Wherever managers are very powerful such that they can do pretty much whatever they want to do without too much questioning going on, it's going to be very difficult to make a PMO work.

If the culture is not a good fit, then a full scale PMO implementation is simply going to fail. Because you're trying to force-fit accountability -which is what project management is all about- onto an organization that has no interest in being accountable at all.

The second reason is overreach. And this is the thing that scares a lot of organizations that are being told they need to do project management. The first thing the PMO director does is to issue everyone a copy of PRINCE II® or PMBoK®. Or one of the consultancies shows up with their big four hundred page book of templates and things. And they look at that and think: "*This is much too difficult! We can't do all this!*" And you hear this all the time! "*Look, you know we're in the business of putting out software, in the business of building bridges or whatever it is that we do. You know we can't take five or six months filling out paperwork for a project that is only going to take two months to do!*" Of course that doesn't make sense, and you've killed your credibility from the start. I think a lot of PMOs fail because they don't know any way to do, other than the full bore approach that they've got written up for themselves.

The third thing I think that caused them to fail is the lack of the prime motivator. As we all know with change initiatives that has to be solidly understood.

### **You mean a business case?**

Not just a business case, but an actual something that really is a motivator. Many organizations are



large enough to absorb something that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but they want to do it anyway. But to make a major change to an organization that really isn't very process driven, that's not used to accountability, that's not used to planning those kind of things... to create a change in behavior, to even begin doing project management, it requires a very strong motivator.

You know, even at the individual level the people need this. In the adult learning community there is an axiom that says *"After the age of eighteen people do not change their behavior until they experience a significant emotional event"*.

If I'm working in an organization, and I'm getting promoted and I'm doing well, or even if I'm just continuing to collect my paychecks. If I think that's going to continue, I have no reason to change. Now I'm probably not planning to take it to the point of getting fired because I won't change, but in many cases I may well believe that my job is more likely to go away if we do make the change. So as long as you believe that nothing catastrophic is really going to happen, well, you might look at these new ideas, but you have no real motivation to do it.

Another reason that PMOs fail is that often they're put in top-down.

So when somebody said *"let's do a P.M.O."* you have a situation where *some* people believe that that would make things better in the organization but everybody *doesn't* believe that. Some people don't believe the P.M.O. will help, some people believe that the organization doesn't really need to change all that much. I've had several engagements where they had some serious problems we were able to help them fix by doing project management stuff. And about a third or half the way into it, people have told me *"this is really good, you know, things are going better now... But, you know, it's difficult, it's hard! We have worked much harder than we did before and... Why can't we just do things the way we were doing before and then you do this project management stuff on top of that?"*. You know, *"Why can't you sit in your corner? We'll just give you the information and you do all that project management stuff"*. The organizations are not really mature until the PMO actually can take itself out of the picture completely. Because if the accountability is only there because the PMO makes it happen means that you're not really being accountable.

### **Do you see any leverages in order to limit such risks?**

Yes, this is going to sound self-serving, but the approach that we talk about in the Simmer book. If the organization is not ready yet, your only approach is to slowly try to change the culture from within, assuming that you are the person that believes that things would be better if there was governance and project management.

### **Kind of a variant of simmering for coaching...**

Yeah! In the overreach problem it's the same thing. If I can't install a full Project management approach on day one, then I have to take it in increments. And it would be wise to take those increments that the organization can swallow. Show the benefit, show some small wins. And then they'll let you do something else.

Likewise the lack of a prime motivator. If you don't have any real reason for wanting to change that, I can't make you change. All I can do is find a couple of people who are doing it the way that I think it should be done, or want to do it that way. We do that and we show people what they can do to make things better. To make it stick and spread, we want other people at their level thinking: *"You know it looks like that thing you are doing kind of works. Maybe what you guys are doing could work for us; maybe we could try that in our group"*. And eventually people start doing it.

2015-10-3 riglav and dbrownpm

All that really is about what the Simmer System™ is about. And I don't say that just to promote the book or the system. The book was written in recognition of the fact that it doesn't work the other way. And so the Simmer System™ was my after-the-fact compendium of, after doing it the hard way and beating my head against the wall a couple of times, I found a way that *does* work in situations where the environment is not really conducive to do it by the best practices.

**So, when are you releasing *Let It Simmer*?**

It's going to go on pre-sale this month (October 2015). It's in final edit now. When it gets done with the editor I get to do some final clean-up, and we'll put it up on Amazon. That way, people will be able to pre-order it by late October. Then they will be actually on sale in November.