

# How to Stop Herding Cats: Leading Project Teams through the Chaos

Bill Fournet  
The Persimmon Group

September 2011

---

## Abstract

Do you feel that managing your project team is like managing a herd of cats? Do you have people going every direction? Do you have accountability and control of the process and the team to ensure a successful project? Most managers feel that they spend more time herding cats than actually leading their projects. This paper focuses on why this happens, and how project managers have gotten their “cats” under control. Discussions include current project team management trends, team performance opportunities, and applying principled leadership. Readers will learn effective techniques that will address project teams’ challenges, various communication approaches, and project leadership skills that have successfully improved team interaction and results. This paper will not only motivate, but will also help project managers develop the skills to create a focused, disciplined team.

## Introduction

Many of us are familiar with the comparison that something difficult is “like trying to herd cats”. The phrase refers to trying to manage or control the chaos. In project management, herding cats is something most project managers are familiar with, as it is often experienced when people are running in different directions with different drivers or intentions. So how do project managers succeed in the daily task of cat herding? What sets a good cat herder apart from a poor one?

There are many aspects to the difficult task of project management that can help managers better deal with their team of cats, starting with a manager’s leadership approach, the controls they implement, and how they communicate with the various stakeholders. With the speed of change in business constantly increasing, project managers must learn quickly how to ensure their teams are pursuing the same vision, identify how their team best performs, and then adapt their approach accordingly.

In addition to the increased pace of change in business, shifts in methods, management trends, and pressures from a multigenerational workforce with its multigenerational attitudes require new leadership approaches to manage effective teams. Different from the more traditional hierarchal style of managing, principled leadership empowers a project team to think outside the box, take ownership, and be innovative, while still holding the business to a standard of excellence and ethics. This innovative leadership style is an initiative that aligns an organization’s people and projects more closely with its strategy and vision.

By understanding the trends, challenges, and make-up of a project team, managers can then learn how to become more successful at leading their project team to a successful end result.

## Traditional vs. Agile Project Management

The discipline of project management was developed as a method of scheduling, obtaining, preparing, and directing resources to successfully carry out processes through specific goals and actions. Traditional or waterfall project management, through use of its distinct life cycles and sequential flow, has been a successful means of completing projects since its birth out of the engineering, construction and defense industries nearly five decades ago, an alternative approach. However, agile project management, is making a strong entrance particularly in regards to the IT industry.

Traditional project management consists of regulated and deliberate planning and control methods. Throughout this method, project life cycle phases are clearly defined. Tasks have an orderly sequence, and are completed in the order to which they are defined, requiring a large amount of the project to be planned up front.

Traditional project management presumes that events affecting the project are predictable and that tools and actions are well comprehended. Additionally, traditional project management assumes that once a phase is complete, it will not be revisited. The strengths of this traditional method are that it presents the steps for development and emphasizes the importance of requirements. This process is frequently viewed as a waterfall. However, projects aren't always able to follow a sequential flow, making it tough for clients to completely affirm requirements early in the project.

With companies focusing on improving these standards, it's been seen that traditional project management may need to adopt another method of project management to create and deliver results: Agile.

Agile project management has many "flavors" of approach, but typically, it is a process consisting of a highly iterative, collaborative, and incremental project plan. During this process, project stakeholders work alongside developers to identify the vision, understand what needs to be developed, and determine functionality. As such, this method strongly promotes and encourages feedback as it is highly collaborative – stakeholders, business analysts, developers, and testers work side-by-side throughout the effort. A large differentiator from traditional project management is agile's support of the team setting: small teams work from the same location, instead of developers being located on different sides of the globe. It involves a small group of developers, the end-user, architects, business analysts, and a project and program manager. The team's first goal is to recognize and focus on the solution based on the value it will bring to the business. The highest value features will be prioritized and deployed first.

Due to the fact that the Agile method is made up of many rapid iterative planning and development cycles, team members are able to continually evaluate the project and receive feedback almost immediately from project stakeholders and end-users. Improvements are then able to be made throughout the entire project life cycle. Like traditional project management, any successful project must start with planning, definition of requirements and a design period. However, once the project is underway, waves of iterations begin flowing, pushing the project along to completion.

### **Current Project Team Management Trends**

Project management is an ever-changing phenomenon – just as businesses must learn to be flexible and work with market conditions, project managers must also learn to

adapt to the changing trends in the practice to be the leaders their organizations need. To think of it in a better way, more project leaders are needed, not more managers.

Most project managers—as well as most organizations—have applied the Command and Control approach towards managing their people for the past five decades. Yet, business today is in the midst of a transformation in its workforce, its technologies, and its models that requires Command and Control to be adjusted or abandoned completely. The emergent management trend is Innovate and Attack, born out of the military, from the more recent Iraq and Afghanistan leadership lessons.

### **Command and Control**

This term is most often used in a military context, and refers to creating policies while providing the mechanisms to execute them. Born out of World War II, where it was used by the military services lead men in combat, this model stresses the hierarchy – formal and clear boundaries of control and authority tied to titles or classifications. The strategy and objectives are understood by the leadership and not shared with the subordinates. Instead, the subordinates in the hierarchy are provided assignments on a "need to know" basis, and once they report back that the task is complete, the leadership confirms its completeness and assigns the next task. This model enabled modern global companies to grow in the 1950's and 1960's, because the hierarchy leveraged consistent, universalized processes and procedures to scale the operations and to ensure quality was maintained during that growth.

Command refers to the authority of a manager over his or her subordinates to make sure they are readily trained, prepared, and understand how their activities align with the mission at hand. This ensures resources actually carry out their mission (tasks), with the commander (manager) providing guidance for the unexpected (Command and control, n.d., ¶3).

In contrast, control is the amount of authority to which a manager has to delegate command. In accordance with U.S. Army policy, "While command is a personal function, control involves the entire force. Control is the regulation of forces and war fighting functions to accomplish the mission in accordance with the commander's intent. It is fundamental to directing operations" (Operations, 2008, p. 5-1). This type of management structure was largely seen during World War II, and is the type of leadership from which most traditional organization leaders and project managers emerged. In order for command and control to be

successfully implemented, leaders must manage their team's informational process in order to determine which types of information are required at different levels within the hierarchy.

However, with the changes in corporate culture, generational differences, and the ever-evolving communication styles within business, this form of management is being abandoned. It is limited in its ability to adapt and it is resisted by the new American workforce who has been raised in more collaborative teamwork approaches. This emerging workforce is lending itself more to the Innovate and Attack approach, which empowers workers to think on their feet and respond quickly to changing priorities.

### **Innovate and Attack**

The Innovate and Attack approach to management developed formally during the Vietnam War (although informal, ad hoc examples existed throughout history), but was not formally accepted by military leadership as an enterprise application until 2007. It was largely portrayed by the United States Army and Marine Corps during the Iraq War's "Surge" operation by Generals David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno. This approach focuses on the leader sharing the strategy, goals, and objectives with the team members, as opposed to withholding them (Ricks, 2009, Chapter 5, section 5, ¶4). It is a non-hierarchical model built around skill and competency-based roles that have authority boundaries, through which personnel are assigned. The person assigned to one or more roles owns certain responsibilities defining ownership and accountability for work. The team – consisting of a variety of roles – is then enabled to pursue the objectives how they see best to achieve them.

The leader's role in this approach is to mentor the team and manage the boundaries or principles in which the team must operate (in a corporate application, these may be the policies, rules, and values). With Innovate and Attack, the team composition may vary based on operational needs, and the "team" can change the number of roles and personnel in them to adapt. In contrast, the Command and Control approach is built around consistency in the number of roles and their composition within the team: teams are not trained to change.

Innovate and Attack was developed through U.S. Special Forces teams, where the speed of change in political, tactical, and cultural arenas emphasized the need for adaptability, versatility, and flexibility. A great example of this approach was during the Afghanistan operations:

In October 2001, 14 Special Forces operators landed in northern Afghanistan with a simple mission: Develop a Northern Alliance amongst the tribes and defeat the Taliban in that region. In capturing Mazar-i-Sharif, Doug Stanton in his book, *Horse Soldiers*, says the soldiers "accomplished in two months what Pentagon planners had said would take two years. In all, about 350 Special Forces soldiers, 100 CIA officers, and 15,000 Afghan troops succeeded where the British in the nineteenth century, and the Soviets in the 1980s, had failed" (Stanton, 2005, Epilogue, Section 1, ¶3). An army of 50,000-60,000 Taliban was defeated. In 3 months, these 14 men, along with the 3,000 tribal fighters they helped organize, defeated and captured more than 30,000 Taliban. This result, considering the imbalance in manpower between these two forces, was incredible.

Even more incredible is how they accomplished the mission. The Taliban army had armored personnel carriers, artillery, and heavy weapons in its arsenal tanks. The Northern Alliance had horses and rifles dating back to World Wars I and II. These Special Forces team members adapted to the situation, leveraging the strength of U.S. assets to support the local fighter, while brokering tenuous alliances between three tribal leaders who warred amongst themselves prior to fighting the Taliban. Every hour saw change. Every change required adjustment. Yet, the result was achieved fully and dramatically. Through clarity of their roles, the strategic objectives, and operating as a high performance team, the Special Forces operators adapted and innovated "on the fly" to the situation, to achieve the results. (Stanton, 2005, Epilogue, Section 1, ¶5-6).

In business, innovating then attacking works for those businesses who want to stay in the forefront of modernization and technology. With this model, business leaders see all team members as capable of giving fresh improvement ideas for the good of the company and its values. This includes empowering and enabling a project team to go about a task in a new and innovative way – telling them that asking for forgiveness may be better than asking for permission. This approach leverages some of the similar team management techniques established in agile methods, and creates a highly adaptive project team that can then achieve the overall goals and objectives while quickly resolving crises.

### **The Chaos: Team Performance Challenges**

There are many challenges that project teams incur due to the changing world in which project management now resides. Between the Web 2.0 revolution, the differing

attitudes between generations now making up the workplace, and the constantly evolving communication mechanisms available, project methodologies are no longer “one size fits all.” Project managers have to learn new methods of teamwork and technology.

In October 2004, Tim O’Reilly re-coined the concept of “Web 2.0” during a conference brainstorming session. O’Reilly noted that the web was gaining more value than ever with new end-user friendly applications and sites popping up regularly (O’Reilly, 2005, ¶3). This daily interconnection with the web placed more power in the hands of the internet. Through the creation of social networks, and the popularity of blogging, wikis, and media sharing, the web has given way to community and collaboration like never before.

Even more recently, the “cloud” has significantly changed the way that businesses operate, allowing companies a new way to deploy and scale company-wide communications. This internet-based computing allows resources, software, and information to be shared by computers and other devices on demand. Cloud computing provides a cost-effective way to provision processes, applications and services, along with making IT management more responsive. This has also allowed companies with many offices and branches to share the same resources simultaneously. This technology is designed to promote innovation that ultimately provides companies with new solutions.

Lending to the chaos is the breach in generations that is currently making up the workforce. Organizations today are being made up of four distinct generations, each with differing values, work ethics, and ideas of what the workforce should look like. To understand the differences, it’s valuable to first understand these generations.

Traditionalists are those born between 1922 and 1945, and make up 76 million people in the world today. Their worldview was largely shaped by the Great Depression and World War II, and they value security, stability, due process, fair play, and hard work. Boomers consist of those born between 1946 and 1964, and is a title that applies to 80 million people. They came of age during the Civil Rights Movement, nuclear disarmament, consumer advocacy, and the Women’s Rights Movement. Boomers value competition, relationships, loyalty and efficiency.

Gen X is the smallest generation since the Great Depression. Born between 1965 and 1981, Gen Xers make up 46 million people of today’s population. They value a work/life balance, tend to be results driven, and

are generally unimpressed by authority figures. Gen Yers are those born between 1982 and 2002 and make up 76 million people. They are the product of the self-esteem movement and are thought to be the best educated and most technically literate. Generation Y Values include teamwork, job flexibility, technology, and multi-tasking.

Despite the decline of workers due to the Boomers exiting the workforce, it is also easy to confer that while the older generations have been noted as extremely loyal employees, Xers and Yers may value their relationships with co-workers above their relationship with the company, as well as viewing job-hopping as a career advancement method. Effective project managers must learn to operate from a management style that involves these younger generations and allows them to take ownership and responsibility for their work.

Another factor that creates difficulties in managing project teams is the dynamic changing world where we now live and work. Members of the workforce are no longer bound by the 40 hour work week – business can be done and projects can be managed from anytime, anywhere. This 24/7 world we lend ourselves to can create tension among project teams as social media and technology create increased amounts of imbalance and miscommunication. With emails, tweets, and messages coming at team members from all hours of the night from this technology that is supposed to add to productivity, workers are really only getting burnt out, lacking innovation and time to think about their next step. In an article, journalist Fauzia Burke relays a message from author Daniel Forrester of *Consider: Harnessing the Power of Reflective Thinking In Your Organization*, saying that “our habitual use of technology and bias for immediacy and rapid response has contributed to fragmenting our attention across many issues at the cost of allowing deep exploration around any one issue” (Burke, 11, ¶9). Sometimes for project teams, turning off the noise means turning on the productivity (Godin, 2011, ¶7).

But how can a manager lead his or her team to thrive in this ever-constant world? By managing their own expectations as well as the expectations of others, project leaders can ensure that technologies are used for good rather than evil. When project teams are able to disconnect from Web 2.0, interactive smart phones and more, real work can still be accomplished as team members are able to use time to think rather than react to their technology. The communication options available today are helpful tools when used to serve the needs of the project team, rather than enslave those utilizing them.

## Herding Cats: Applying Principled Leadership to the Chaos

"You will never know a line is crooked unless you have a straight one to put next to it." (Jones & Jones, 2011, Editorial Review).

Even as the classical Greek philosopher, Socrates, understood the importance of the straight line principle, organization leaders and project managers alike must have an understanding of valuable methods to measure decisions and business success. Principled leadership lends a way for this by surveying the qualities and values needed to establish a "straight line" for project teams (Jones & Jones, 2011, Editorial Review).

### Defining the Principles

Principled leadership is defined by those who make decisions based on their core values and what they hold as truths— those who let their principles drive their actions. These leaders apply ethical standards of right and wrong to shape their policies and decisions in business, government, or simply the way they live their life (Burgess, 2001, p. 2-3).

Alan Yuspah, senior Vice President, Ethics, Compliance and Corporate Responsibility, the Hospital Corporation of America Inc., identified three important characteristics of a principled leader: articulate with principles and values, able to make tough decisions, and capable of dealing virtuously with others (Seijts & Kilgour, 2007, ¶9).

Being capable of clearly communicating certain principles and values is a vital part of being a principled leader. Consistency between what the leader "lives" and the business decisions he or she makes can make all the difference. For example, consider WestJet Airlines, who identifies nine values on their website, including honesty, openness, and a dedication to their commitments. However, the company recently admitted that its executive team was behind a scheme to steal commercially sensitive information from their competitor, Air Canada. WestJet was forced to admit their wrongdoings and pay a hefty settlement due to their lack of honesty and poor judgement. (Seijts & Kilgour, 2007, ¶5). A principled project management leader must constantly re-evaluate his or her values to ensure their business approach is aligned.

A principled leader must also be able to make tough decisions when required. They not only make an effort to get all information necessary to make an informed

decision, they also encourage decisions to be made at the right level, by empowering their employees to make decisions aligned with the company values. Apollo 13 Flight Director Eugene Kranz exemplified this leadership quality, when for years, he had championed a strong set of values, which bled over during good times and bad. Kranz worked to form a culture of discipline, confidence, and commitment that would keep his team together throughout any hardship. In business, leaders must be principled – but not so that their principles will paralyze them from taking action (Seijts & Kilgour, 2007, ¶11).

Although there are many characteristics of a principled leader, the last explored here is that of how leaders deal with others. Humility and integrity are considered at the peak of those traits of how managers interact with their team. Manual London, Director of the Center of Human Resource Management at the State University of New York believes that principled leaders work to understand the points of view of all on their team, without working "over, around or through other people" (Seijts & Kilgour, 2007, ¶12).

### Applying the Principles

Principled leaders do understand the importance of business diplomacy and work to enhance relationships and resolve sensitive conflict. Sooner or later, leaders will face the challenge of holding true to their values in the face of pressure. In today's business world where principles collide, it's not uncommon that doing the "right" thing doesn't align with making the easy decision.

Former Hewlett-Packard CEO, Carly Fiorina explained character's importance to success in her 2006 memoir, saying "Character was everything, and character was defined as candour, integrity, and authenticity. Candor was about speaking the truth, and about speaking up and speaking out. Integrity was about preserving your principles and action on them. Authenticity was about knowing what you believed, being who you were, and standing up for both." (Seijts & Kilgour, 2007, ¶27).

### Adjusting the Principles

Just as important as having solid values and principles that shape a leader's behavior, managers must realize when principles need to change or evolve in order to adapt to the changing world. While the innate values of an organization may not ever change, an adjustment may need to be made based on the culture of the world around it. New environmental and social standards force companies to be forward thinking in order to be

sustainable. As business practices are reevaluated to align with objectives, organizations may find themselves more quickly adapting to remain viable to stakeholders. Although business principles need to be based on core values and beliefs, they must also consider corporate strategies, policies, goals and initiatives that are based on economic, social, and environmental drivers.

### **What Successful Cat Herding Looks Like**

Successful cat herding doesn't have to be an impossible feat. Project leaders can get their "cats" under control by leveraging the generational differences that make up their project team, managing to objectives rather than procedures, learning to solve problems collaboratively within their team, and utilizing effective methods of conflict resolution.

As discussed earlier, there are generational differences that are now making up the workplace. However, project managers can take advantage of the strengths of these generations by learning how to leverage the variables for the good of the project team.

### **Role-based vs. Title-based Management Models**

For many firms, the gap between the person on the highest and lowest rung of the corporate ladder has become a real barrier to their future success. Companies have grown in scale, merged and expanded, without realizing the quiet hurdle that was growing within.

Today, companies are shifting away from the traditional hierarchies of the corporate ladder and have replaced them with teams that are more agile, adaptable and versatile. This approach enables companies to respond to change and crises more easily, while maintaining focus on the strategy. A team-based organization is flatter, trading the vertical levels in for breadth of horizon — fewer management layers and broader capabilities.

Flattening the organization requires companies to focus more on roles than titles. Traditional hierarchies are based on titles that represent decision-making and budgetary authority rights. As a person moves up in the organization, their authority rights expand. However, their visibility decreases as they move further away from the front lines, too. This can cause increasing disconnection between front lines and executive management. Roles can have authority too, but they do not increase by moving up in the hierarchy — instead, they move outward to different roles.

The result of this approach is a more accountable and disciplined organization that works through teams and roles, rather than titles and levels. The number of roles can expand in number based on the needs or the organization rather than its size, enabling the company to grow or shift its focus faster.

### **Effective Conflict Resolution and Collaborative Problem Solving**

Most exposure to conflict within an organization does not typically lead to positive results, but rather seems to stall progress, inject negative tension among team members, and potentially damage client relations. Conflict usually arises when team members differ in opinions, experience miscommunication, fall prey to unrealistic or changing goals, or perceive threats to their physical or emotional well-being.

Emphasizing collaboration and empathy are two ways to reach positive solutions and retain team cohesion. Collaboration requires honest communication among team members, which leads to collective brainstorming. Collaboration cannot happen without empathy, which is the effort to understand the others' points of view and intentions behind their behaviors.

The key to successful conflict resolution is understanding the common intentions that the conflicting team members' share, such as the desire to resolve the issue in the most effective manner. Once emotions are channelled toward the solution rather than the person, collaboration can emerge. Organizational leaders can influence team processes to promote positive collaboration within conflict. Training and mentoring can provide tools to team members that will support an understanding of conflict and preventive techniques that lead to collaboration. As a result, organizations can overcome the negative outcomes from conflict and leverage the experience to discover new and innovative solutions (Stiles, 2010, p. 81).

Using these methods for cat herding not only sets realistic customer expectations for a project, it also reduces risk by creating accurate impact analysis when requirements change or priorities shift. A successful agile team is able to see that their people are dynamic, and are able to analyze the impact of an evolving project or program. This validation reduces excessive rework, which in the end assists the project in being on time and on budget. Adapting cat herding practices is an established way for organizations to complete projects, both large and small, within precise timeframes and budgets.

---

*Bill Fournet is the President and CEO for The Persimmon Group. He provides business strategy, educational development, and information technology consulting to clients in various industry verticals, including energy, financial services, aerospace, telecommunications, government, and human resources, among others. He is a sought after speaker and educator and balances this demand with continuing to be a leadership and management practitioner.*

*The Persimmon Group is a management consulting firm that works with organizations, in both the public and private sector that want a tailored approach to business growth and improvement opportunities. Since 2004, TPG's experienced consultants have provided a wide range of expertise in many industries and in numerous areas including business strategy, project management, information technology, and leadership development, among others.*