DR02: Dealing with "Gatekeeper" Project Managers

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Project management (PM) is the world's fastest-growing profession, and arguably the youngest in the design & construction world. Contrary to the opinion of some architects I know, its providers are not similar to those of the world's oldest profession. Perhaps because it is a young and evolving profession, the level of professionalism one encounters varies greatly.

At the top end of the scale, practitioners bring great benefits to projects: they understand thoroughly and respect the perspectives and needs of the consultant team as well as other project stakeholders, they bring superb management skills, and they add value at every step of the process.

At the other end of the scale are the practitioners who appear to have emerged from under rocks, who win work by promising to carve their fees from the consultants' fees, who have little understanding of that which they purport to manage, who do not add value, and who appear to see themselves as mule-train drivers whose main tool is a coiled whip. We've all encountered these pseudo-PMs.

Most independent project managers in the design and construction industry are somewhere in between these extremes. Certainly the Project Management Institute (PMI) is working globally to increase the professionalism of project managers.

The "Gatekeeper" PM

One of the most annoying practices that some project managers of the second variety follow is to set themselves up as "gatekeepers" – controlling access to the client, and insisting that all communication with all team members goes through them. While they see themselves as providing some kind of essential "communications hub", in fact they actually slow down (and sometimes disrupt) good communication. The practice increases the risk of everybody in the project team, except for themselves.

The "Postbox" PM

Often the syndrome described above is accompanied by the "Postbox" method of "managing" document flow. In this scenario, the PM never checks or coordinates anything – he simply forwards them on to those he thinks should receive them.

The "I'll take care of it" PM

The above approach often goes hand-in-hand with a third syndrome – the "I'll take care of it" promise that is never kept. These PMs use this line to cut down the fees of other consultants, but rarely follow through.

The result? Frustration all around, delayed progress, gaps and overlaps, and the PM blames everybody else.

Is there a solution?

There is one strategy you can use, that - while not getting rid of a useless PM- will help greatly to force them to either do their job or delegate it to people who will.
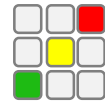
I developed this tool originally for Denton Corker Marshall in 1986, specifically in response to the triple syndrome described above. Then a paper-based system called "Task Manager", it has been through several iterations since, and is now an integral part of the **iProjects** Design Management suite: **TeamWork**.

TeamWork identifies key coordination tasks for 28 design disciplines (including the PM). With **TeamWork** you swiftly create project-specific checklists for key tasks, for every discipline of the project team. You can move **TeamWork** tasks from one discipline to another with a single mouse click.

TeamWork gives you very low-overhead management of discipline interfaces, supporting the ability to offer cost-effective, detail-oriented project management services. Most importantly, it identifies the tasks a PM needs to do, and helps you to ensure that somebody is assigned those tasks. It works.

Below is a sample Task List.

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