

BOOK REVIEW

ADRENALINE JUNKIES AND TEMPLATE ZOMBIES

Understanding Patterns of Project Behavior

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Understanding Patterns of
Project Behavior

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Principals of the Atlantic Systems Guild

"Brilliantly insightful." — Howard Look, VP of Software, Pixar 

Today, armed forces are in continuous transformation. As new technologies are developed and new principles of war are introduced, the ministries of defenses and armed forces have to adapt to this changing environment. Almost every day, military officials start new projects to handle the technological and cultural transformations in the military. Project management became an integral part of defense development and management. Today, all high or middle level military officials are either a project sponsor overseeing a project, or a project manager executing a project, or a member of project team helping the project to become a reality. As a result, project management skills became an essential part of skillset that a military official need to successfully execute his/her duties.

There are many books on project management. Most of them follow the mainstream set by the infamous project management guidebook, Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) [1] by Project Management Institute. Every couple years, the PMBOK is updated to reflect the current body of knowledge in project management. The current PMBOK outlines the basic project management knowledge areas: Project Integration Management, Project Scope Management, Project Time Management, Project Cost Management, Project Quality Management, Project Human Resource Management, Project Communications Management, Project Risk Management, Project Procurement Management, and Project Stakeholders Management. Many of the project management books discuss these knowledge areas in full or in part. After reading a couple books, anybody will be familiar with the next book in the mainstream. However, there are also a few books outside this mainstream providing an insight or a different view. For example, “The Deadline: A novel about project management” [2] by Tom DeMarco is such a book. It is written as a novel about a project manager’s experience in a fictitious country. Another book called “The Mythical Man-Month” [3] by Frederick P. Brooks is a condensed text of the experiences of a large-scale project manager. The book, “Adrenaline Junkies and Template Zombies”, is among the few books that have a different taste than the mainstream project management books. It basically explains various good and bad patterns of information technology (IT) project behavior in a tasty manner.

The first striking aspect of the book [4], “Adrenaline Junkies and Template Zombies: Understanding Patterns of Project Behavior”, is its authors. The authors of this book have many of years of IT system design and project management practice, teaching, and consultancy experience. I became aware of this book during a webinar by one of the authors, Tom DeMarco. As soon as the webinar is concluded, I went to a book store and bought a copy of the book. I finished the book in a heartbeat the same day. I was fascinated by the taste of the book.

The book consists of 88 project behavior patterns. Each pattern is described in a couple pages with associated project stories. Additionally, each pattern has a unique and striking name. Authors intend to leave a mark on the reader using these striking pattern names. In fact the title of the book actually includes two of the project behavior patterns: Template zombies, adrenaline junkies. Authors state that they originally composed more than 250 patterns. Due to various reasons, they could only fit 88 of them in the book. Some of these patterns are good, intended project behavior and some are bad, undesired project behavior. In literature the bad patterns are also called

“antipatterns”. It is possible to say that most of the patterns included in the book are antipatterns. I believe that this is intentional since many of the current books on project management include the good patterns described in a technical way. Therefore, the authors mainly focused on antipatterns and they described them in a nontechnical way supported with familiar project stories.

Some of the pattern titles described in this book are:

- Dead Fish
- Happy Clappy Meetings
- Referred Pain
- No Bench
- The White Line
- Lessons Unlearned
- Counterfeit Urgency
- Short Pencil
- The Empty Chair
- Orphaned Deliverables
- Food++

In the pattern “Template Zombies”, the authors describe the blind mentality of enforcing templates without question or without customization in projects. They warn the readers that in project organizations, there may be certain people that attempt to apply process or production templates just as they are laid out in a book or standard. The authors emphasize that these project members, template zombies, are in fact missing the point, which is these templates should be tailored based on the needs of the project. These templates are actually the physical manifestations of certain project development philosophy. As long as you follow the development philosophy, you can modify these templates suitable to your project needs. If the templates are not customized as necessary, then the project team members will resist to follow the templates as they see that some of the template portions are unnecessary or irrelevant work.

In the pattern “Adrenaline Junkies”, the authors draw attention to an unhealthy behavior in some project organizations. In these project organizations, there is a culture of doing everything in a frenzy manner. Everything is urgent. Priorities are always changing. All personnel should immediate postpone what they are doing if an urgent work should be done. These types of urgencies never end. This behavior should be familiar to some readers. The word “junkie” is a careful selection on author part. Junkie is actually an informal word for drug addicts. The constant pressure to do things in an urgent manner is seen as an addiction to adrenaline by the authors. In these organizations, the higher level managers of managers believe that keeping the organization in a constant state of frenzy is good for productivity. The authors emphasizes that these types of organizations will be unable to build big projects. Because large-scale projects require careful planning, long-term strategic thinking, patience, and concentration.

“Referred pain” is one of the patterns the reviewer is fond of. The authors did put an effort to find good pattern titles and this is a good example. A person feel a headache and goes to a doctor. The doctor gives him a medicine for the headache. The person takes the medicine and the pain goes away for a while. Then the pain comes back. Again, the person takes the medicine and the headache goes away. The process continues but the pain does not go

away completely. Soon, the medicine becomes ineffective. After a while, it becomes clear that the cause of the pain is an infected tooth. Because it is misdiagnosed, the problem gets bigger and the dentist has to remove the tooth. In some cases, the problem with a tooth manifest itself with a headache rather than a toothache. The pain manifest itself in another part of the body rather than the part that actually causes the problem. Therefore, this type of pain is called a referred pain. The authors describes a certain behavior in project organizations using this metaphor. In some organizations, certain problems are tried to be solved without the search for the root causes. The solutions applied without the understanding the root causes will be temporary and most likely the problem will get much worse. In these cases, it is advised that if a problem keeps coming back after applying the same solution a couple times, then the managers should seek the root cause of the problem rather than insisting on ineffective solutions.

“Food++” is a one of the good project behavior patterns. In some organizations, a group of team members voluntarily get together for lunch, dinner, picnic, barbeque, or other similar events. They emphasize that while having food together will not get the project done, it certainly builds stronger relations among team members that will eventually create a synergic project environment.

The “Lessons Unlearned” pattern describes the organizations that keep repeating the same mistakes over and over. In these organizations, the members hold lessons learned meetings. They lay out certain action items. But the action items are not carried out. As a result, these lessons are in fact unlearned.

The “No Bench” pattern describes the project organizations in which certain critical tasks are only carried by a few distinguished people. These roles are not backed up. Therefore, these projects are risky because they depend on certain critical personnel to do their jobs. If they leave the job, no one has the necessary knowledge to complete the job. In these cases, it is advised that all critical roles and tasks should have backup a team member with the necessary skill and knowledge to continue the work.

After reading the book, the reader will have a smile or a grin in his/her face because the reader will quickly remember the bad and good experiences faced during his/her career. Most of the patterns are easily recognizable when it is read. After reading the book, it is likely that the reader will be able to quickly recognize most of the problems in their respective project organizations.

The only critic of the reviewer is that the book could have included more patterns. It is such an entertaining and eye-opening book.

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