



FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF *Dr. Alexander Laufer*

## Looking Ahead With Anticipation

*Today's fast-changing projects call for managers to be highly responsive to the unexpected—those surprises that can alter the course of a well-laid plan*

THE “OLD SCHOOL” APPROACH WAS TO EMPHASIZE CONTROL as adherence to plan—much like using a thermostat: a point is set; then, by measuring the temperature, the heat is turned on or off, maintaining the pre-determined standard. It's simple and stable. But projects rarely are. In today's fast-changing world, a more suitable metaphor for project control would be coaching. A coach would hardly be effective if he was isolated in the locker room, receiving statistics via a monitor—he needs to see the game in order to guide his team.

While it may not be possible to eliminate uncertainty, you can anticipate many of its surprises before they occur, and hence lessen their impact. Project managers must review formal reports—as well as “move about” during the progress of a project. I call this “systematic monitoring,” a two-step process of evaluating critical planning assumptions and providing timely feedback for continuous planning.

The following 15 rules for systematic monitoring are taken from “Ninety-Nine Rules for Managing ‘Faster, Better, Cheaper’ Projects,” which can be accessed in its entirety at <http://67.92.16.242/nasa/lauffer/99rules.htm>.

1. Identifying a small problem is difficult; correcting it is easy. Identifying a big problem is easy; correcting it is difficult.
2. Dynamic environments require monitoring the validity and achievement of objectives (effectiveness), and the utilization of the means (efficiency).
3. In unsuccessful projects, there is never enough time to do things right, but there's always time to do them over.
4. Management systems don't control projects. People do, helped by management systems.
5. Only team members directly responsible for project implementation can control projects.
6. What is yet to come can be controlled. Last week's performance is relevant to the project team only when it helps them decide how to do next week's work better.
7. More paperwork does not ensure more reliable or accurate information—and it only seems that more measurement and reporting means better control.
8. Excessive control often “encourages” employees to distort data or develop aberrant practices to suppress critical information in fear of management reprisal. This, in turn, provokes even greater management suspicion and scrutiny.
9. Successful teams know that effective project control does not result from reviewing and analyzing performance reports, but rather by carrying out effective front-end planning.
10. Managers who stay in one place are forced to make complex judgments with incomplete cues.
11. Master project managers control the project by employing formal performance reports and by moving about.
12. Moving about contributes not only to “understanding,” but also to “influencing” project control; plus, it allows project leaders a natural, subtle, and timely influence on project activities.
13. When uncertainty is low, control is best implemented by measuring performance and then by taking corrective steps to adjust performance to the plan. As project uncertainty increases, control is less of a “governor” of execution, and more of a data collection function for continuous planning.
14. In uncertain conditions, “control” should provide feedback for planning, and thus its emphasis should be on looking ahead with anticipation rather than looking back with justification.
15. When uncertainty is high, the best way to control the project is by selecting adaptable and responsive people. •