

In this special 10th anniversary episode, we have a scenario-driven conversation that puts real-world project challenges front and center. Since 2016, the podcast has grown into a global community of project managers, made possible by loyal listeners and expert guests. Join us as we celebrate 10 years of learning, growth, and leadership in project management.

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Intro

BILL YATES: looking at the conversations we’ve had on Manage This with project leaders who have done such a diversity of projects, it’s such an eye-opener for me to hear the stories of other project managers and how they took on big obstacles and overcame them and what led to their project success.

I love it. I'm a big believer that I can learn from any industry. And project management, there are always lessons to be learned from every industry. So that's one of the things that I enjoy most about this podcast is being able to have those conversations.

WENDY GROUNDS: Hello and welcome to [Manage This](#), the podcast by project managers for project managers. And we are so glad you've joined us today. I'm Wendy Grounds, and in the studio with me is Bill Yates, Ren Love, and Andy Crowe. We have a full house today. We have a very special episode of Manage This. Can you believe it, we're celebrating 10 incredible years of conversations, insights, and project management know-how. Our podcast was started in 2016, and we're still running.

Before we jump into our conversation, we want to say a very big thank you to all of our audience. You're the ones who've listened, you've shared, and you've learned with us along the way. You're the reason Manage This has made it to this milestone. And also, to every guest who's joined us to tell their story or share their wisdom, you've also helped immensely in building this amazing community, and we're so grateful for you.

PASSTrack™

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Project Managers Playbook

Episode 240 marks our 10th Anniversary Special, and today we're turning the tables with something totally different. We're calling it the "Project Managers Playbook." And Andy, Bill, and Ren are here with me and ready to tackle real-world project challenges in a whole new way.

Here's how it works. In Round One, I'm going to present a scenario that a project manager might walk into on their projects and our team decides what's the first move a project manager should make this week. In Round Two, we'll consider a strategy shift. What is the long-term plan to make sure it doesn't happen again? And then comes Round Three, the curveball. Ren is going to shake things up with a surprise twist. Think executive override, budget, freeze or maybe even a client meltdown. You never know. Get ready for a mix of practical advice, some fresh perspectives, and lighthearted moments as we mark 10 years of Manage This.

So, first thing I want to do is welcome the team. It's great to have everybody in the studio. Andy, start off with you. Thank you for being here today.

ANDY CROWE: This is great. Can you believe it's been 10 years?

WENDY GROUNDS: It's gone by really fast, yeah.

BILL YATES: It's fun to have all the people in here.

WENDY GROUNDS: It is fun. Yeah. Usually it's just me and Bill, but a big welcome to Ren, as well.

REN LOVE: Hi, yeah. I'm glad to be here. It's very exciting.

Scope Creep Spiral

WENDY GROUNDS: All right. So, we're going to jump off straight away with our first challenge, which is the scope creep spiral. Here's an example from a project manager. I'm leading a software rollout, and the client keeps adding small requests saying they're quick fixes. My team is frustrated, our budget is shrinking, and I don't want to damage the relationship by always saying no. So how do I push back without losing trust?

BILL YATES: Okay, Wendy, I'm going to take a first shot at this one. When I read this, I could feel the pressure inside of me building. It was like a boiling pot. I'm like, oh, the team should be frustrated with this project leader. The project manager, the project leader needs to lead. So, this situation should not have come into play anyway. It's, you know, a classic scope creep situation that needs to be handled by the project leader.

So, my first recommendation would be for that project leader to meet one on one with the client and explain why things need to change, why this has to stop. We can't have scope creep. There's so much blocking and tackling that we do in project management, and scope creep is one of the biggest ones. So, they've got to stop the madness. They've got to jump in and do that. That's the first call to action that I see is just to explain to that client, hey, this has to stop, and here's why.

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah. Do we have a strategy shift, kind of the long-term fix to prevent this type of thing?

ANDY CROWE: I can't help but think about there is a song, maybe it's in "Oklahoma," the musical, "I'm just a girl who can't say no."

BILL YATES: Yes, I know it.

ANDY CROWE: You kind of have two sort of opposing systems here. You've got, in the agile world, they embrace change even when it comes late. So, something like this would not be frowned upon. Then you've got the more predictive structured world, which I suspect this is part of that world. And now every change introduced late hits a cascade. You know, we talk about the "iron triangle" a lot – scope, time, and cost – and that those are tied together. You can't change one without impacting at least one of the other sides. And then you go on, and risk and customer satisfaction gets folded in there as well. And now it just cascades.

So, somebody comes up with this great idea and this small change that they want to introduce, and you want to keep the customer satisfied. But now you're increasing all of these things. And they said the budget is getting tight. So, the budget's fixed, you know, where it's not moving. It's not increasing. And of course, the team's getting frustrated here.

So yeah, the first thing is to work with the client, implement a more formal change control system, and talk it through, and work it through, and say, okay, now it's going to impact these other areas. And you have to. You have no choice because the team can't constantly mop that up and just continue to absorb that. It's awful.

BILL YATES: That's the part that I have seen have ripple effects on a team. The team starts to lose confidence in the leader. They're looking at the project manager going,

this client is killing us, and somebody needs to step up. And I thought that was your role. You know, they're probably not going to say that out loud, but it's going to be sensed and picked up on by the team. So, the PM has to step in and take control.

REN LOVE: Yeah, I think part of the PM's role there is protecting the team from those kind of, kind of unsanctioned requests, but also remembering that they're protecting the end goal of the project. And so, these consistent and constant change requests, they compromise your long-term project goals anyway. So, you know, that's another reason to make sure that not only are you doing the quick fix, which is like these small changes have to stop right now; the long-term fix, which is let me reiterate to you our change control system that we should have been following, and let's implement this now.

Executive Sponsor Override

But, okay, how about this? Little curveball. What if you sat down, you had a hard conversation with the client, you said, "These have got to stop." The client goes above your head, talks to your executive sponsor. The executive sponsor gives you a call and says, "Okay, just make it happen. Whatever that client wants, just make it happen." What do we do? What do you guys think?

ANDY CROWE: I grab my magic wand. You know how Obi Wan was able to wave his hand in front of somebody and convince them.

BILL YATES: They would speak what he wanted.

ANDY CROWE: These are not the changes. That kind of thing happens, certainly happens. And so, I would ask the executive sponsor, look, if it's just going to happen, if

the clients in charge, we need to shift our whole mindset on what scope is, what the budget is. Something's got to give, something's got to move here, and you need to free up some money. We need to just completely adopt a more agile mindset with change and go a different direction.

BILL YATES: And Ren, I like what you said about remembering the "why" behind the project. It's like, okay, we met early on. You know, these are scope change requests. This is scope creep. We defined the scope. Why are we creeping off of that?

So, did priorities change? Did something change in the marketplace that you have not told us about? If so, let's have a conversation. But if we're still trying to execute this project to what we thought were the highest priorities, and now those are shifting day by day – and, hey, it's my job to make sure that we stay focused on the most important thing. If the most important thing has changed, fine, tell us, and we'll execute towards that. But we don't want to undercut the purpose for this project. So, let's get our stuff together.

REN LOVE: Yeah.

The Vanishing Resource

WENDY GROUNDS: Very good. You ready for challenge two? Okay. Project management with a vanishing resource. So halfway through our construction project, one of my most skilled team members was reassigned to another initiative. We don't have anyone with the same skill set, and the timeline is at risk. What do I do to fill the gap and keep momentum? I'm sure you've had that happen. Anybody want to take that one first?

BILL YATES: I'll take a shot at it. Yeah, so this may sound a little counterintuitive, but the first thing I would do is I'd go to that manager, and I would say, "Are you sure you want to take this resource?" You know, ask why this has happened. And just, I mean, be bold and say, "I need to have this resource back. Let me tell you why Susan was so important to my team. Here's the skill set that Susan had. Nobody else on my team has it. Are you aware of somebody else within our organization who can step into Susan's place?" So, I'm inviting that manager to understand and to be a part of the solution.

I mean, managers, you know, you think about, like a program manager, they have several project managers that are coming to them and asking them for things. Maybe the program manager, maybe this manager just said, "You know what? I need to pull Susan off of Bill's team because somebody else needs them," and didn't even know the consequence. So, before I just say, okay, well, Susan, good luck, and we're out of luck now, I need to go fight for it. I just want to raise awareness first and see where that lands.

ANDY CROWE: I had a situation like this on a project that I was managing a long time ago. And the resource that was plucked from my project was named Richard. And Richard was so good and so technically competent. And it was a wakeup call to me because I was not really aware of how much I was leaning on and relying on this one person. And I did not have good coverage for that skill set. And we had to absolutely figure it out. We had to develop other people.

Richard was an expert in a particular database that we were using. And we had to go develop those competencies internally. And it meant investing in training and investing in time and so forth. So, you know, to some degree, functional managers will do that.

They'll wait until the moment of greatest maximum pain and pull that resource off your project.

BILL YATES: Richard, come here.

ANDY CROWE: This is not the project you're working on. You know? But it's a reality. And so back to the whole agile mindset. You know, agile, they make commitments as a team, and they like having generalizing specialists on the team. So, you don't have siloed people that this is our database expert. You have a whole team of people who know how to do that. Gets very expensive, but there you go.

REN LOVE: I think I was really lucky in my previous job where, if we had a resource that was pulled from our projects, we oftentimes just went to our bank of contractors and just picked one or two of them and said, hey, come on in and fill these gaps. This is what they were working on. Part of what made that possible is we had really good documentation of, you know, what was working, and we already had contractors on the bench.

And we were allowed, budgetarily approved, you know, as soon as we lost those key resources, they were like, hey, yeah, just go ahead and grab those contractors. But I know that some places don't allow that. Like if you might have a hiring freeze or something like that.

Develop Internally

But it sounds like Andy and Bill have already kind of answered that curve ball, which is what happens if you can't just go hire a contractor, which is you develop internally in

your team, or you've already had contingencies in place where you have overlapping skill sets in your team members. Or Bill said, you just go back to that person and say no.

ANDY CROWE: Or you dust off your résumé.

REN LOVE: Yes.

BILL YATES: You know, one other idea I'll toss out there, and the person like Richard, or I think I used the character of Susan, you know, that person who's been plucked from your team, many times I'm like in a panic situation, and I'm forgetting an obvious out, which is I need to go ask Susan, hey, you're really skilled. I hate to lose you off of this team. Who is the most like you? Who's your Mini-Me?

I know Austin Powers always looked to him for advice for project management, but he had all these characters that Mike Myers built. One was called Mini-Me. So, you know, who's your Mini-Me? That person who's about to get plucked from my team. Is there somebody I'm not aware of, that you're like, oh, no, this person over here, whether in the organization or not, could step in and take this role.

REN LOVE: Yeah, that's a good point. An internal skills audit.

BILL YATES: Yeah.

REN LOVE: Saying maybe they know more than I think they know because I hired them for another very specific role in this project. But they may have more.

ANDY CROWE: Now the image of Dr. Evil feeding Mini-Me a hot pocket is playing in my mind.

BILL YATES: Yes.

Remote Communication Breakdown

WENDY GROUNDS: All right, let's talk communication. So, this is remote communication breakdown. For example, our project team is fully remote across three time zones. Updates are getting lost. Miscommunications are piling up, and some team members feel left out of decisions. The project is fine technically, but morale and collaboration are slipping. How can I fix the communication flow? Who would like to head off that one?

ANDY CROWE: You know, we are making a transition. We were purely virtual for a little while. During the lockdowns, we made the decision to go purely virtual. Now we're transitioning back to a live in-person collaboration hybrid model. The communications are so much easier when you see people regularly.

So remote communication is immediately fraught. And I'm the worst, I'm the poster child of somebody who, A, doesn't do a good job with remote communication; and, B, doesn't like it at all. It's really difficult. You know the right things. The right things are you have to be more intentional. You have to have regular touch points. I don't do any of that. I'm terrible at it.

So, it really is a challenge for some people. And there are things that you can misread over the phone. I was grouching this week that I had a conference call with somebody.

And of course it has to be a video call now. You can't just pick up the phone and, you know. I miss the old days of speaker phones, and you can multitask, and no, no, it's got to be, you know, whatever. So, it's just funny. It really is a challenge for some of us.

BILL YATES: The word "intentional" really stands out to me when Andy says that. I think of some of the things that we went through with the Velociteach team when we did go fully remote. And Wendy, I've got to give you props for, you know, many of the efforts that you took to help us.

First of all, like we had to come up with our own communication plan. Because we're all working remotely. It's like, hey, when are you going to be online? When can I ask you questions? How quick a response will I get? Those kinds of things, availability, responsiveness. So, let's talk about some of the things that we did as a team to help create good habits.

Communication Agreement

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah, I think we were running into that problem. We had people we just didn't know when they were online or how to approach them. How do they like to be communicated to was something that we found a challenge. And so, what we...

BILL YATES: Do they like to be on a video call or not.

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah. Do they? And there was that. Do I call you? Do I text you? Do I email you? There were all those ways. What is your preferred method of communication? So, we actually, as a team, sat down and worked out a

communication agreement. We broke down into small teams. We had questions, and we went through them, and we came up with a plan of how are we going to do this.

And then we met together as the whole team. We designed this communication agreement, which everybody kind of signed on it and said, all right, this is how we are going to go forward. And it worked. I think everybody respected it. We do sometimes forget. We sometimes forget we have an agreement.

BILL YATES: Yeah, for sure.

WENDY GROUNDS: And we just have to kind of tweak it every now and then. We actually had a thing on our calendar to remind people. I think it was once a month or something during standup. Hey, don't forget, we have this agreement. So, I do recommend that.

REN LOVE: One of the benefits that we have on our team, though, is that all of us are based on the East Coast. As a matter of fact, most of you are based in Atlanta. I'm the weirdo who's up in South Carolina. But I've had projects before with very different time zones. So, our development team was actually in India. I was on East Coast. And then I had some of my other, like, national engineers, they were on Central Time.

And so, we had some challenges where, you know, I would have standing meetings at 8:00 p.m. Eastern to hand off to the team lead for India. And that wasn't necessarily sustainable. It is something I signed up for. So, I'm, you know, not complaining about it, but not something I want to do for my whole life. That was something that was pretty interesting.

Team Alignment Across Time Zones

But I do have a question for you guys, which is, you know, we had a couple times on that project where we had super critical decisions that had to happen within, like, 24 hours. And it actually was really hard to get all of the key decision-makers onboard in that 24 hours to make a decision. So, for us, it ended up being whoever was available would make the decision. Usually that worked out. But I don't know if you guys have any other thoughts on, like, a good way to approach that.

ANDY CROWE: Yeah, there's no great way to approach that, where you have a distributed team, you have to make a decision right then. Years ago, I did a project that had six countries involved – the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands. So, all of these countries, each of those countries had a country manager. And then I was the project manager.

And the challenge was twofold. One, getting everybody together. And then number two, the languages and cultures were different. And they really were quite different. The way decisions were approached, the way work was executed, they were just different.

So, we had an icon that we would send out that was the bat signal. And the bat signal came out, and it meant, look, this is very important. Need you to drop everything, and we need to come together. So typically, we would do these calls at 10:00 a.m. because that's the only time everybody's schedule hopefully aligned. And we would get everyone together on a call, walk through and try and make a decision.

And again, there honestly were rivalries within this group to where, if one person supported it, the other was going to oppose it just because. It was just crazy. So, it's challenging, and it might not have been any easier if we were all face to face. Might have been worse, quite honestly.

REN LOVE: Safety behind the screen there.

ANDY CROWE: Yeah, but I think doing the best to keep the focus on the decision and off of the personalities and off of the history as best you can, you know, is certainly a way to go.

REN LOVE: One of the things we ended up making sure in addition to all of that was we actually knew who the key decision-makers were. So early in the project, we spent too much time trying to herd cats where it was like, well, this person has a little bit of stake in this decision. Let's bring them in just to hear their thoughts.

Well, when you work across multiple time zones, and when you have big decisions to make in limited time, you really have to think, you know, who really needs to be at the table, who really needs to wake up at 3:00 a.m. for a decision-making call and who doesn't. So, I think that was also part of that.

BILL YATES: A friend of mine is a part of an IBM global support team. And one of the things that you said, Ren, made me think about my friend Steve. So, the protocol and just the expectations, you know, kind of scheduling things. He's a part of this support team; and he knows, like, one weekend out of the month he's going to be on call. So, it's going to be a pretty bad weekend. Yeah.

He has to be close to home because he's responding to the bat signal. And he knows his protocol in terms of who he has to run the ideas by or the solutions by to engage on. It's not the whole team. It's specific. Who else is on call in this region or that region. Yeah. It's almost like you kind of schedule your pain. So, you know, as a team, you figure out how to take care of it.

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Sudden Deadline Shift

WENDY GROUNDS: Next one is our deadline shift. We've been working toward a six-month launch, but leadership just moved the deadline up by six weeks due to market

pressure. My team is panicked, and I'm not sure what to cut or how to re-plan. How can I reset expectations without burning everyone out?

REN LOVE: I like Bill's original answer for, what was that, the first one, where he just said no. Just, no?

BILL YATES: Yeah.

REN LOVE: No. No, but this does actually go back to a little bit of what Andy was talking about when he introduced that "iron triangle," where you have, you know, scope, schedule, cost. In this case, they want flexibility in schedule.

So, the quick answer to that is going back to that team and saying, "Okay, so what part of the scope can be reduced, or how much more money are you going to give me?" And hopefully you'll get a real answer for those two. In real life, you may not. But I think that would be my first response to that statement, which is something else has to change. Which one is it going to be?

ANDY CROWE: Asking the team for heroic effort, just put in more hours, just try harder is a miserable strategy. And yes, your team will be panicked all right. I had another project quite some time ago that was a software development project and different organization. And they offered an absurd bonus to everybody if we could have the product released by Thanksgiving.

There was absolutely no possibility that that could happen. You know, it doesn't matter. You could throw whatever you wanted to into it. It just wasn't realistic.

There were three of us doing the development. And there was no way, no way possible. We had to integrate something like 240 banks into a software. And each one of them was just a lot of work. So yeah, it's another one of those things where somebody's trying to change one part of the equation, and it is going to ripple out somewhere. You're probably going to have team members leave.

BILL YATES: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I think a mature conversation to have with, we're using the word "leadership" here, whoever that is that came up with this decision to let's move the date way up. Let's have a conversation one on one and just talk about the risks that they're introducing by doing this. It's like, the quality of what we're doing. We talked about the impact on the team, morale, how sustainable. We don't know what type of project this is in terms of regulatory bodies or safety concerns, those kinds of things.

So, you know, just having a one-on-one conversation about, all right, here's what you're asking us to do. These are the risks that are kind of jumping off the page at me. Are you comfortable with those? That's one place I would start, too.

When "Failure is Not an Option"

REN LOVE: Yeah. The curveball twist here is, you know, you're sitting in that meeting with leadership, whoever they are, mysterious leadership, and they're really not giving you much of a response other than failure is not an option, and you just have to get it done. So, you know, balancing that pressure from leadership with the realism of on the ground. That can be really challenging; right?

ANDY CROWE: And I will point out failure is always an option. It may not be a good option.

BILL YATES: I think Andy put me onto this podcast called Acquired. And Ben and Dave look at the origin story of a company. And it's usually a company that we know like a...

REN LOVE: Similar to How I Built This?

BILL YATES: Yes, yes, yes. Similar, yeah, yeah. Little, yeah.

ANDY CROWE: Little more intellectually rigorous.

BILL YATES: Yeah. Yeah. But there's an episode where they're looking at the beginning of Visa. So those pieces of plastic that we have in our wallets, the Visa card. And Dee Hock, he's passed away now, but he was the founder of Visa. He had this disdain for project teams and their schedules. He just didn't trust them. There was a great quote. He said: "Dee maintained that if you give computer people" – so computer people. "If you give computer people more time, they will just consume it." So, he would do aggressive scheduling.

REN LOVE: What is that part? Is it Parkinson's Law?

ANDY CROWE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

REN LOVE: Where work expands to fill the time allotted to it? And wasn't it Microsoft who used to purposely say, you know, they would do all their estimating and say a team of five would do this in two weeks, so I'm making a team of three do it in one.

BILL YATES: Yeah, yeah.

REN LOVE: To combat that. Was that Microsoft?

BILL YATES: Yeah. And that's one of the key pieces of genius behind the critical chain method.

REN LOVE: Yes.

BILL YATES: They cut schedule and fat to the bone.

REN LOVE: But all of that to say, you know, Andy did mention one of the key things to remember in something like this is that the – more so than any of the actual physical work that gets done, like the mental state of your team is something to really, really think about when you're speeding things up.

He mentioned an unattainable goal. And is that expectancy theory, which is an award for doing heroic effort is only motivating if it's achievable? And then if it's not achievable, it becomes anti-motivating, where the team gets so demoralized and then starts just leaving, or work just stops being done. That was a depressing point in that sign.

Managing Difficult Personalities

WENDY GROUNDS: And with that, we're going to talk about managing difficult personalities. So, for example, I'm leading a cross-functional project with a hard deadline, but two of my key stakeholders don't get along, and their conflict is spilling into our team meetings. It's slowing down decision-making and creating tension with the rest of the team.

I'm caught in the middle and worried this friction will derail our timeline. How do I keep the project on track while also managing their personalities?

ANDY CROWE: We have – this is sort of funny. We have office full of people today, and we've got a dog in the office, and the dog...

REN LOVE: And he's perfect.

ANDY CROWE: The dog has a wonderful personality. My dog, which may be more accurately my wife's dog, is coming in in a little while to join us. And I think those two personalities, they might do really well, but they might not. There's actually a better than 50% chance that they may not do so well together. It's going to be very interesting to see.

And so, Ren and I, prior to this, we're strategizing. What do we do if the personalities do not align well? And I think the answer that we came up with is, okay, we're going to need to sequester. I would say, you know, knock heads, but you could knock my dog's head all day long. He's a French bulldog, and he's got his own opinions about – his

head's shaped like a battering ram and his personality matches that. So, it may just be they need to be sequestered. You do what you have to do.

You know, project managers have to provide leadership in a number of different ways. And one of those ways is absolutely stakeholder management. And there have been plenty of times I've had to metaphorically knock heads together and put people in time out. And now sometimes those people are people that you're working for, and you have fewer options. But it's absolutely a problem.

Taking Time Out

BILL YATES: I think time can heal all wounds; right? And there are times just like, you know, with when you're raising kids and you recognize the need for a nap or the need for separating two kids, or two dogs. I mean, there are times when I've been heated about something, and I need to go cool off. I need to remove the emotion from the conversation. And that just takes a little bit of time. Then I can come back in the afternoon and, all right, let's pick this back up. What are the different options we're looking at? What can we do?

ANDY CROWE: Yeah. And it takes time, and it takes emotional maturity because not everybody is so good at letting things go. I generally let things go really, really quickly and easily. There are people in my life that maybe have a slower simmer and can't bring it down.

REN LOVE: I was going to say, I'm one of those. Well, and I like to call it my previous life, but when I was working in the zoo and aquarium fields. and there were projects happening there, there is this extra level, not to say that other people aren't passionate

about their work, but animal people have a level of passion about animal welfare and animal care that comes into a lot of projects.

And so, there is a lot of time where you have these key stakeholders on, let's say, a project like building an exhibit, which you would think would be pretty straightforward. The animal should live in there, the end; right? But because there's so much passion, because it feels very personal, because they feel like it's about the right thing, there's a lot of negotiation that has to happen there.

So, it's interesting because when PMI says, "Oh, a key skill is negotiation," a lot of times we think contracts, but that's not necessarily it. It's also, you know, negotiating conflict.

But one of the things I've found that helps is, again, reorienting back to why are we doing the project? What's the purpose of the project? And what is it about you that made you a key stakeholder in the first place? So why did we say you were critically important to decision-making?

And I want you to think about why that other stakeholder might also be considered a stakeholder. It's because when we were putting this project together, we knew that these diverse perspectives were really important. We knew we had a goal of greatness. And so, what I need you to do is to stop thinking of, this other person as an enemy and start thinking of them as, you know, a strategic ally and meeting this goal of greatness, which all that is really nice to say, but can be really, really hard. Really hard. Yeah. Oh, I do have a twist.

WENDY GROUNDS: Yeah, go for it.

The Client Notices the Tension

REN LOVE: And I have actually seen this in action, and it's very awkward. But let's say like you're in a meeting. You have those two stakeholders; right? There's tension.

Everybody knows it. And the client has joined into that meeting, and you can tell that they can tell. They are kind of watching, you know, this dumpster fire happen. What do you do? What do you – how do you handle it in the moment? What do you guys do?

BILL YATES: I would try to put that dumpster fire out as quickly as possible.

REN LOVE: Yeah?

BILL YATES: I mean, I think that's the time to speak up. Whether it's to redirect, let's move to a different topic, let's take a five-minute break. I may even pull the five-minute break thing.

REN LOVE: Oh yeah.

BILL YATES: And, "Hey, Timmy, come with me." And then I'd follow up with that client one on one after the meeting just to let them know, "Hey, here's the deal. Timmy is so passionate about this. This is why," you know, blah, blah, blah, whatever. So, give some background, give some explanation, just to reassure the client that, "Hey, we're on top of this." And passion is a good thing.

REN LOVE: Oh yeah, absolutely. So, in the zoo, I was in the education department, and we would do training breaks. But training sessions with birds should be like three minutes or less. And so, I remember sitting in this very stressful meeting. There were a

bunch of stakeholders. Nobody was getting along. It was like all the stakeholders were very upset. And at the time my supervisor said, "How about everyone just go train?"

And so, we all disappeared, trained our animals for like three to five minutes, and then came back. And you had like that nice, "Okay, I got to work with an animal" kind of moment. You know, so that was nice. It was like our – that was our version of stretch. I'm going to go train; okay? Just go train.

ANDY CROWE: You remember years ago when they would have pictures of two brothers who weren't getting along, and the mom would put them in a "This is our get-along shirt." I think taking, you know, if you have team members who aren't getting along, co-locating those team members can go a long way. They may hate each other and then they may figure out how to get along. Team building is not to be ignored. Do events, put intentionality into that to put them working toward a common goal. Put them on the same bowling lane, whatever it is to try and build something.

REN LOVE: And at the very least, and this goes back to the sibling thing because my brother and I were not friends until he left for college, and now we're best friends. But my parents would say to us whenever we were going somewhere, "Pretend like you like each other until we get back in this car." And that's kind of, I mean, you go into a client meeting, and you say, "Okay, I know you guys are at odds right now. Pretend like you like each other until we get back in the car." You know, the client should never see that internal struggle.

When The Budget Gets Cut

WENDY GROUNDS: All right, our last challenge. You guys are doing great. Now this one is when the budget gets cut. So midway through the project, I've just learned that one of our major funding sources has been pulled. The budget cut means some key vendor contracts and planned resources are suddenly at risk, but the client is still expecting full delivery.

My team is anxious, leadership wants answers, and I need to present a recovery plan by the end of the week. How do I regain control of the situation and keep the project on track?

ANDY CROWE: That's good. The client's still expecting full delivery. There's another movie quote where the protagonist tells somebody, "I'd like the McRib served year-round." Yeah, I'm sure you would. You can want that all you want. You know, this is such a frustrating experience; but again, it goes back to the iron triangle. We've seen the scope blow up. We've seen the schedule get compressed. And now there's not enough money to go around. Something has to change.

And it's just so simple. But I don't know, my personality is such that I don't have a hard time having that difficult conversation. Some people do, and I've been around those people and people pleasers and people who really want to delight the customer, and they always say yes.

And some customers, those people are not unusual, are hardwired to take advantage of that and press, press, press. And they'll call it value engineering. They're trying to get

as much as they can get out of this client team as possible. It can absolutely accumulate on you.

We had a project that I was doing for an enormous retailer in the United Kingdom, and the interesting thing, so this goes back to sort of the executive sponsor had made the sale, and the executive sponsor wanted to exceed this customer's expectations any way possible. And so, he regularly said, look, give them whatever they ask for.

And I'm looking at it saying, well, as an organization, we're going to lose money. Doesn't matter. Having them, it's a crown jewel for us. We need this organization. We need this referral. And it put the team through so much. And then, you know, budget cuts came back, and I guess we just absorbed it because that was what we were told to do. It turned out not to be a bad strategy, but it was tough on the project team.

The Science Side of Project Management

BILL YATES: It's so difficult to see. I'm with you, Andy. For me, this seems to be the science side. You know, project management is art and science. To me, this is science. It's like if the customer comes back and asks to break the iron triangle, we have to say, hey, dude, guess what? You just broke the iron triangle. There's science here. You know, we agreed to scope, to budget, and to a schedule. And now you've just cut the budget significantly. So, something has to give. Let's talk about what it's going to be.

And I know it is a difficult conversation for some project leaders to have, but I want them to lean in on the side that they know is true, which is, hey, somebody moved my

cheese. Something happened here. The assumptions that we went into are no longer valid. Let's just have an adult conversation about it. Right?

ANDY CROWE: George Foreman had such a beautiful moment years ago. They were trying to organize him to fight Mike Tyson. And George Foreman said: "I will not fight that man. There is no way. I absolutely refuse. He's dangerous. And I won't step in the ring with him. Period, end of sentence." Then he said: "Now, if that 13 million they offered me turns into the 70 million that I requested, then that period might become a comma." And I probably got the numbers wrong, but the spirit of the quote...

BILL YATES: The spirit of it.

ANDY CROWE: And so that's the way you have to handle that is, hey, we cannot deliver this on this schedule, period, end of sentence. However, ...

BILL YATES: You're right. If you find more resources...

REN LOVE: Find more resources. Was that the crashing and the fast-track day?

ANDY CROWE: Loosen up the budget a little bit, loosen the purse strings, then that period might become a comma.

REN LOVE: This reminds me of the – one of my favorite examples is like the HGTV example. When you watch the home renovation shows on HGTV, if I was getting my kitchen remodeled – you just did that. What was it? Months of a remodel in a kitchen; right?

ANDY CROWE: Oh, yeah.

REN LOVE: Yeah. HGTV does it in like a week, and the way they do it is just throwing humans at - you'll just see the host is walking through there, and there's like 12 people demoing a kitchen. Right? So, what's that? That's crashing. And then fast tracking is when everyone's working on top of each other.

What's interesting, though, is like you can't crash a schedule with budget cuts. So, in this particular case, if they're like, all right, well, we cut your budget in half. You can't throw more resources. In this case, you would say, I'm not even sure I can do the same, like the same scope may not be able to be done, and the same schedule may not be able to be done.

So, if the client is still expecting full delivery, my probably first reaction would be to say, all right, give me twice as much time, But I have been in scenarios, because I worked for governments before, where I was told of budget cuts, but my team heard about them first. So, that's a little twist there because they're publicly announced, you know, we're going to cut this much to the general fund. or we're going to cut this much or whatever. Then you have to mitigate that within your team while you're also negotiating upwards.

And that – that can be really hard. And I'll be really honest, a lot of times that just kills the project. So sometimes the result here is not necessarily you end up with, you know, a successful project, or even a project that took too long. It's like a project that just got canceled and will never be finished.

BILL YATES: Well, that's a happy place.

REN LOVE: Sorry. I mean, but you know.

BILL YATES: That's the reality now.

REN LOVE: Yeah.

BILL YATES: The project manager has to have, again, have that conversation of, okay, if we're cutting this much budget, but you want everything to be delivered...

REN LOVE: Yeah.

BILL YATES: You know, is the quality going to be at such a level that you're actually going to want this product? Right. So, you have to have a conversation.

Final Words

WENDY GROUNDS: All right. Well, thank you, everybody. That was very interesting. And I definitely learned a lot. Does anybody have any final words, something they want to leave for our project managers just to encourage them?

REN LOVE: I am an optimist, even though my answers seem otherwise. It is all doable, and project management is fun.

ANDY CROWE: I'm probably not the optimist. When we were talking about managing difficult personalities, I thought, yeah, but what if you are the difficult personality? You know what? Project management can be a very tough gig, and there are probably easier ways to make a living. But I love the prospect of organizing chaos. I love the

prospect of making sense out of all of the – all of the disparate pieces, and wouldn't trade it for the world.

BILL YATES: And to me, just looking at the conversations we've had on Manage This with project leaders who have done such a diversity of projects, so interesting to me with the limited background that I have, the types of projects that I did, it's such an eye-opener for me to hear the stories of other project managers and how they took on big obstacles and overcame them and what led to their project success. I love it.

I'm a big believer that I can learn from any industry. And project management, there are always lessons to be learned from every industry. So that's one of the things that I enjoy most about this podcast is being able to have those conversations.

REN LOVE: Well, and I think also, too, you know, on the days where for me project management is the hardest, or I'm getting really, really tangled up in the weeds of the work, is just reminding myself to think of the end goal in lots of ways. So, you know, why am I doing the work that I'm doing? When I started doing this work, I thought it was a reasonable choice and that it was an achievable goal. And so, all of those things, it can be really hard, especially people are both the best and hardest part of project management.

BILL YATES: Right.

REN LOVE: They are. And so, I love working with people, but it's also challenging to work with people. All of those things can be really, really hard. But I think once you remember that you're all here for the same exact goal, and all you're really arguing about and negotiating about is how to reach that goal, that helps.

Closing

WENDY GROUNDS: Thank you. Thank you very much for being here. Thank you, all of you, for contributing to this episode. And thank you again to our audience. Without you, we wouldn't be here. So, we appreciate you.

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Until next time, stay curious, stay inspired, and keep tuning in to Manage This.