

A little **PAPERCUT** ebook

# 9 Destructive Behaviours

Project Leaders Need to Avoid

by Geoff Crane



FOREWORD BY  
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## Foreword

To be successful as a project leader, you need to know destructive behaviour when you see it. And there is no better tool for this than Geoff's ebook! The Latin saying, '*praemonitus, praemunitus*,' loosely translates as 'forewarned is forearmed'. "9 Destructive Behaviours Project Leaders Need to Avoid" is an essential read for any individual wishing to be a successful project leader.

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## Introduction

In May of 2010, I sat down to write about nine different behaviours that I believed could put a project in jeopardy. I posted these on my blog, and they were very well received.

I wrote about them because I believe the bodies of knowledge relating to project management don't really touch on behaviour. Personally, I believe behaviour has a direct and tangible effect on projects under a manager's care. To omit talking about it when preparing project managers for the realities of their job seems (to me) like a disservice.

As I've grown and learned over the years, my own personal responses to project adversity have changed. Many times over my twenty-two year career, my behaviour in a given situation has been less than stellar. Some of what I've written is very autobiographical; some is from first-hand observation. The important thing is that we are able to identify the consequences of our behaviour and make suitable corrections before we put our projects in jeopardy.

After all, our projects can't protect themselves!

**GEOFF CRANE**

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## 1// The Sack

Sacks take delegation to a new level. Not content merely to intelligently assign work, Sacks are fully prepared to give away the project vision to someone they trust on their team. If they're very lucky, the person they hand off to will be trained or have experience in project management—but unless the project budget supports two project managers, somebody's getting shortchanged.

While Sacks are happy to give away many aspects of their project, they generally don't like giving away any of their authority.

It's important to note that Sacks are charged with managing their project directly. Sacks are not program managers or portfolio managers who have other concerns and are within their rights to delegate their project responsibilities to another. These are project managers who let themselves get carried along for the ride.



"I CAN HAZ PULL NAO?"



### Consequences:

Because they've divorced themselves from the work, they have only the vaguest understanding of change impacts. They blithely accept any scope changes stakeholders ask for because Sacks have such little investment in the work breakdown structure. For this project manager, there's no reason to push back or ask questions and risk the short-term friction.

I've rated Sacks "Dangerous" on the destructiveness scale because they've effectively cut the head off their own project. I would rate them higher but since the Sack's people will carry him or her, projects often get done successfully in spite of the PM's behaviour. Don't be fooled.

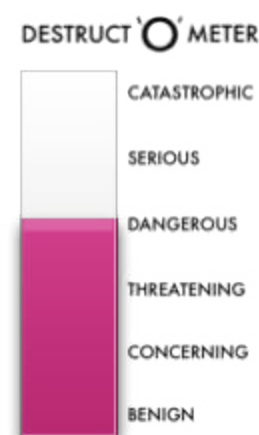
The likelihood that the project team will want to work with the Sack again is pretty low. To compensate for the Sack's abdication of responsibility, the project team has to organize themselves in such a way that they keep each other updated behind the scenes. They also have to forge their own relationships with stakeholders to make sure the project manager doesn't dump a bunch of misinterpreted requirements in their laps and create problems for them.

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This won't end well for the Sack, because the need to bypass him or her to get work done will eventually result in a message that the project manager isn't doing much of anything. If he or she survives to the end of the project, there will likely be a lot of questions about using a Sack again.

**Prevention:**

There's a big difference between "delegating" and "washing one's hands". The project manager has to constantly arrange all the moving pieces of a project into a cohesive plan and vision. He or she has to keep that plan organized and focused on the outcome in the face of tremendous change. If the PM gives that job away to someone who only understands part of the picture, all the work outside the purview of the assignee is at risk.



Quite often the cause isn't that the PM is lazy or autocratic (although that's usually the perception). Projects are meant to create something new that didn't exist before, at that company, for those people. They also cross boundaries between the business asking for the new product or service (the domain), and the developers who will create it. A person trained in project management often isn't trained in the domain or the development.

That's an awful lot of unknown for one person. If the project is especially complex, there can be a big temptation to sit back and let all those other people who seem to know what they're doing handle all the heavy lifting. But those people are depending on the project manager to keep the moving parts together. What's the poor Sack to do?

1. *Learn about your project.* Talk to your people (and buy them a cup of coffee, cheapo). Understand what they do, at least from a high level. You'll learn more in time; but you have to be patient. Rome wasn't built in a day, and even you can't process multiple careers' worth of knowledge in your first week on the job.

*There's a big difference  
between 'delegating' and  
'washing one's hands'*

That doesn't mean you're exempt from asking lots of questions though, right up to the last day of the project. My teams have often likened me to a five year old: "why is the sky blue? where do babies come from? what happens if I push this button? why are you staring at me?" I'm okay with that.

The more you understand about the thing your team is creating, the better you'll be able to steer your project around roadblocks.



2. *Learn effective delegating techniques.* Like many professional skills, there's this big assumption that people know how to delegate out of the box. Let me settle this right now: good delegating is an art form and it's hard. The idea is to assign enough work away from yourself that you're free to do your job, while still being responsible for all of it.

Assigning work effectively, staying on top of the work you've assigned, and maintaining active relationships with your team members will help prevent this behaviour from rearing its ugly head. And knowing you'll live to work another day means the only Saks you have to worry about can be found on New York's Fifth Avenue!

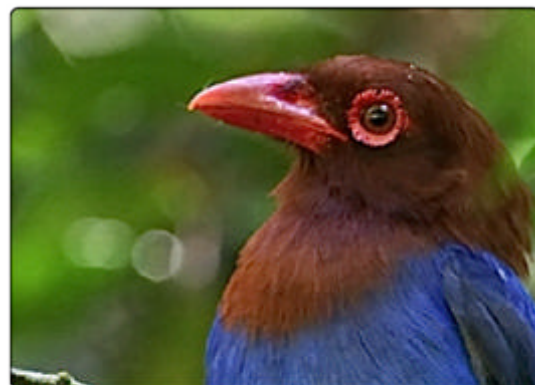
Original Post Date: May 28, 2010

URL: <http://edge.papercutpm.com/destructive-behaviours-sack/>

## 2// The Magpie

The Magpie is a very nervous manager, with an extremely limited attention span. Always flitting from one thing to another, his or her progress tends to be slow. Appearing very disorganized, Magpies are often shunned by stakeholders and team members who'd rather not start a discussion only to feel cast to the gutter the moment something sparkly appears within visual range.

Many Magpies would claim they're "multitasking" when they suddenly soar away from something that has their attention. It's not true. "Multitasking" implies the ability to manage more than one task at the same time. Magpies don't manage the tasks they leave behind; they abandon them.

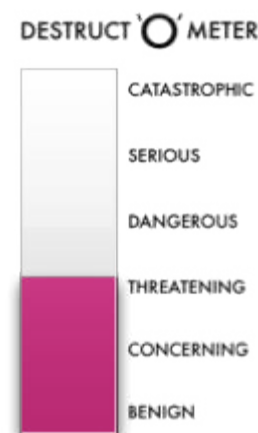


"OOO...SHINY!"

## Consequences:

Magpies get a surprising amount of work done, but the momentum of their projects is often badly impaired. This is because no one thing ever really gets this project manager's focus for more than a short time. Lots of work gets started, and then stops when the Magpie flies away. When he or she returns, the project manager has to get back in the headspace of where they were when they abandoned the work. Then they slowly bring themselves back up to speed on aspects of the work they may have forgotten, and start to make progress again. Whereas learning curves under typical projects may have a gradually quickening incline to the right, a Magpie's learning curve tends to look like a long string of W's on a shallow slope.

I rated Magpies "Threatening" on the destructiveness scale. Because they're hard-workers, their projects will invariably get done. Whether the projects are on time or not is another story. Project quality is likely to suffer under a Magpie's care, as reviews invariably need to be curtailed (or even eliminated) to make the project end date. People who depend on the Magpie for timely decisions often find themselves very frustrated.





### Prevention:

It's easy to dismiss Magpies as lousy project managers, because so many people get exasperated working with them. But due to their high energy and industrious nature, many Magpies can be really successful. That being said, these project managers have some personal challenges they need to be aware of and plan against before they can be effective.

Magpies need to be organized more so than other kinds of project managers. Their natural tendency to flit away from something that has their attention (and leave it unresolved) means important administrative tasks fall by the wayside. Magpies benefit greatly from administrative assistants. Managing a calendar, booking resources, keeping an environment tidy and organized...these things come easily to many people. They're capable of integrating these tasks into their day-to-day work routines, even though the work may not be convenient or fun. Magpies, on the other hand, with all their flitting around, often forget to take care of these tasks and in so doing create problems for others.

Incidentally, many people seem to believe that if someone has to hire an assistant, they must be hopelessly incompetent. They're wrong. A manager needs what a manager needs.

For project managers with low clout, however, hiring an administrative assistant is often not an option (although if it will overcome a known obstacle, I think it makes good sense to include provisions for one early on in the project). These project managers need to find less obvious ways to overcome their Magpie behaviour.

The first thing I'd advocate is personal time-boxing. Basically, you're going to plan out your day, each morning, and assign appropriate time frames to tasks you know you have to get done. You're going to stick to

*If you think someone  
who needs an assistant  
is incompetent  
...you're wrong*

that schedule and if someone interrupts you, you're to ask that person to come back later when you're free. Time-boxing requires discipline to be able to adhere to, and that can be challenging for a Magpie.

So as a sister task to accompany personal time-boxing, I'm going to recommend (don't laugh) yoga. I'm not advocating changing your philosophies; I'm talking about purely physical exercise and meditation. Specifically, "ashtanga yoga" is used to increase strength and mental focus. Finding a class at a local gym can help discipline both your body

and mind and give you tools to enable you to pay attention longer, and avoid the distractions that hurt you.

Incidentally, if you're like me and the thought of going to the gym and showing a bunch of strangers your gut and cankles makes you cringe, why not check out the Wii Fit. It's got a great selection of yoga games you can play alone at home (where no one can see you fall off). I have one, and I will say it takes a tremendous amount of concentration to get good!

Taking a structured approach to being organized (and remember there's no shame in getting help with that), time-boxing work, and practicing focusing techniques (like yoga) can help Magpies keep an eye on the breadth of work under their care. While it may take a little more effort than you expect at first, it will pay off in the long run. The big irony that Magpies often discover when they finally make real progress is, the shiniest thing of all is themselves!

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### 3// The Deer in Headlights

We've all been there. A boardroom full of people is talking amongst themselves and almost in unison swing their heads towards us looking for a decision. As we face down their (in our minds) hostile demands, we know we have to say something. For many of us, this very scenario is the basis for glossophobia, or fear of public speaking.

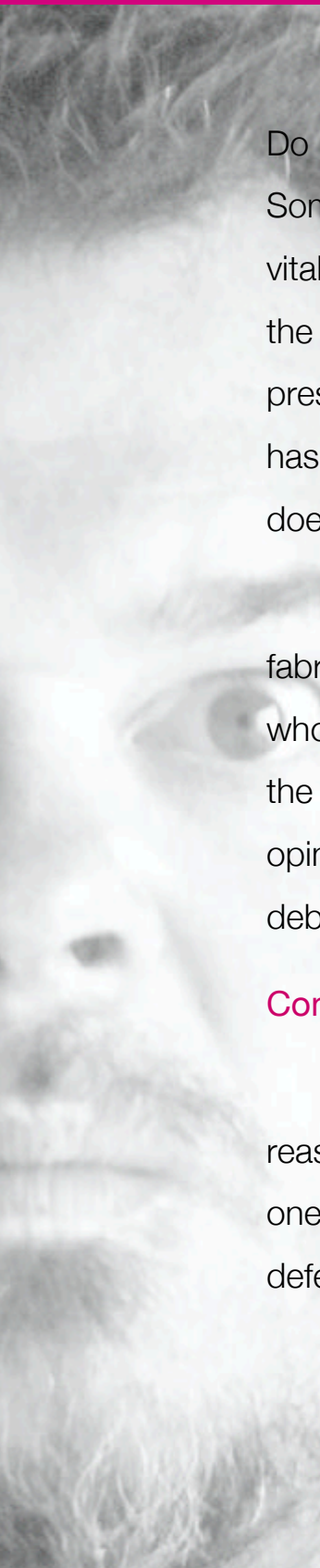
While glossophobia can be debilitating for some, it does no damage to a project. A speaker's job is to communicate information, and any such needs a project has are transferable. What does cause damage is another phenomenon the above scenario can create: decision paralysis.



"WH-WHA...UM...UH..."

When presented with a situation that requires a decision, the Deer in Headlights (who I shall refer to as the "Deer" for the balance of this article) will do his or her absolute level best to defer the decision until some magical future time when he or she is prepared to make it.

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You can immediately tell a Deer by excessive use of phrases, “When Do You Need to Know By” and “Can I Get Back to You on That”. Sometimes these phrases are appropriate. If the project manager needs vital information to make a decision, and that information is not present, the PM can’t choose without taking a big risk. If that information is present, however, using these phrases is merely a deferral tactic. The Deer has all the information required to make the decision; he or she just doesn’t want to.

So pathological is the Deer’s need to avoid decision, they may fabricate phantom reviewers who need to provide their input (reviewers who had never been mentioned before). They may even go so far to stall in the face of overwhelming expert advice by seeking out a lone dissenting opinion from a source with low credibility. Finding a dissenter means debate can continue and decision-making can be further delayed.

**Consequences:**

I rated Deer as “Serious” on the destructiveness scale. The only reason I’m not rating them “Catastrophic” is because I’m reserving that for one particular type of behaviour that trumps all others. While Sacks may defer their decision-making authority to someone else, at least those



decisions are getting made. Deer, on the other hand, plunge a new nail into their projects' coffin with every decision they try to duck.

Deer adversely affect every aspect of their projects. Decisions routinely need to be made around costs, schedule, change requests, scope, quality, human resources, risk, procurement, communications, and

*“So, um, when do you  
need to know by?”*

integration. These decisions aren't one-time events—they're ongoing, and making them effectively is the fundamental force that drives a project forward. A project manager needs to be strong in this area. An individual who cannot make a decision is not ready to manage a project.

This is a tremendous pity because while Deer can be criticized for so many things, they cannot be criticized for not caring. Deer care too much: that's the problem. For the Deer, each decision means an ending.

### Prevention:

In other articles in this series, I've tried to offer self-help suggestions project managers can seek to lessen the impacts of their destructive behaviour. Deer behaviour however, requires outside help and management intervention. The cost of Deer behaviour to a project is too

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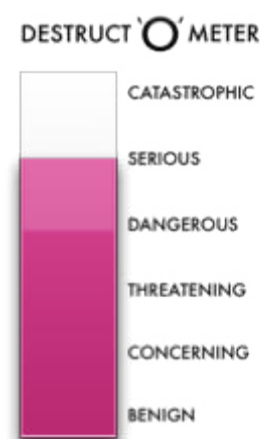
great to allow it to slide by, and the cost to the PM directly when the dust finally settles can be substantial. The irony about this particular behaviour is, someone needs to take decisive action to save a project from a Deer's indecision. If the Deer doesn't take care of it, someone else will have to. That can have dire consequences for the Deer's career.

Management intervention is a very touchy subject. So before steps are taken in that direction, the PM needs to recognize his or her own Deer behaviour for what it is, and then think very deeply about the following:

- 1) Do I behave like this because I'm not ready for this job.
- 2) Do I behave like this because something else is wrong.

A good checkpoint question for the foregoing is, "have I been an effective decision-maker before?"

If you find yourself exhibiting Deer behaviour, and you have previously been a high-performing project manager, I would advocate seeking medical help. I've been there (boy, have I), which is why I'm so bold about saying this. An inability to make decisions can be symptomatic



of non work-related, but serious mental health issues that we sometimes encounter in our lives. Mental health issues are no joke, but can be treated. Under the right care, decisiveness and high-performance can be fully restored.

Before you slough my advice off as nonsense, remember the consequences of not addressing your Deer behaviour: *you will drive your project into the ground*. It's far better to seek medical help and find out that you just need a vacation to relax, than to do nothing, bury your project, severely damage your reputation, and find out that something far more serious is going on.

If you find yourself exhibiting Deer behaviour, and you have not been called on to be decisive before, then perhaps you're just untested. And that's okay! You don't come out of the box having all the answers. Effective decision-making is a skill that takes time to develop, and some people will find an easier time of it than others. That being said, if your indecision is impairing your ability to function, you need to speak with your manager and ask for help before your project suffers unnecessarily.

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In many people, Deer behaviour can be a real hindrance to their jobs, but they can get by. For a project manager, however, Deer behaviour is a major, very serious warning sign that something is wrong.

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*URL: <http://edge.papercutpm.com/destructive-behaviours-deer/>*

## 4// The Hungry Vulture

Vultures (the actual birds) aren't very well liked. We see them when we drive down country roads, perched near the dying, and often have to overcome an urge to throw things at them. This is because nobody likes a carrion-feeder. They wait patiently for their victim to die (rather than either offering a helping hand, or a clean kill), and when the victim exhales its last breath, the vulture pulls them apart and eats their remains. They know their prey isn't going anywhere—at least the corpse isn't. Whatever may once have been inside the corpse is irrelevant. The vulture's maxim: "Let them suffer. I'll soon be fed."

Wouldn't it be nice if this behaviour were restricted to the animal kingdom where we wouldn't have to observe it in our day-to-day lives? Unfortunately, it's not the case. Humans can behave like this too. When a project manager demonstrates this behaviour, I call him or her, "the Hungry Vulture".



"FLUB IT. PLEASE"

We've encountered them all our lives, ever since school age. They're the bullies, the naysayers, the fail-makers, and sometimes, the monsters. It's an unfortunate fact that for many of us, we escape these types of people in school, only to find new people cut from the same cloth as adults.

One of the most difficult aspects of Vultures is, they view their own behaviour as virtuous. Getting them to break this behaviour requires a lot of work. Vultures tend to view anyone who challenges them as weak-willed and irrelevant, regardless of the source of the feedback. So devoted

*A project manager can't change their behaviour if they can't recognize it.*

to this logic are they, that if a Vulture is terminated for odious behaviour, they will ascribe weakness to the manager who fired them rather than looking inward.

Just like their winged counterparts, Vultures aren't particularly introspective.

Because I'm quick to speak my mind (sometimes a failing in itself), I've openly asked Vultures, "don't you think the way you acted there was a little, oh, I dunno, reprehensible?" Looking beyond the words that came

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out of their mouths, the cold smile on their face showed me I'd given them something to take pride in.

Over the years I've observed this type of PM, I've seen both active and passive Vulture behaviour. When someone is having trouble and the PM publicly derides or otherwise hurts them, I call it active. Think of a real vulture whose hunger is getting the better of it and takes a couple potshots to speed things along.

When the Vulture recognizes imminent failure in another, and stops what they're doing to quietly watch someone fail...I call that passive. Passive Vultures are a lot harder for others to spot, as its a quiet thing. But the behaviour isn't accidental. Passive Vultures know exactly what they're doing.

Take a look at the continua pictured here and you can see how Vultures turn valid concerns into reasons and excuses for abuse. The cited motives may be altruistic but the intent behind the behaviour is to cause harm.



### Consequences:

What Vultures fail to realize is that their success depends not upon the failure of others, but upon the success of others. In a project environment, everyone needs to support everyone else. This support shouldn't be at the expense of other work, and shouldn't compromise a sacred scope boundary. But in the great marathon of a project, each participant is likely to fall down from time to time. If we let them fall and stop to pick at their corpse, the project will suffer. In the project manager's case, this is even more important, because everyone else is following the PM. If the PM stops for any reason, the project isn't going anywhere.

As ugly as Vulture behaviour is, I'm only rating it "Dangerous" to a project. If everyone on the project is unhappy, afraid, untrusting and otherwise miserable, the project will still get done. It may be an awful experience for everybody involved, but the project will ultimately close. However, I would expect both the schedule and quality to suffer due to all the stops along the way, and the fact that the team is highly dysfunctional. Few besides the Vulture would be operating at peak performance. Also, since the Vulture's goal is his or her next meal rather than the goal of the

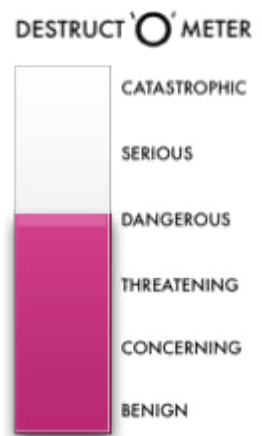


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project, it's likely that most decisions relating to the project outcome will be secondary until the project is fully completed.

**Prevention:**

It's very important for project managers to understand boundaries. There's a difference between protecting one's scope from others who need to a place to dump work they can't handle, and actively letting people fail. It's true we can't compromise our own positions to offer a helping hand; but if there's nothing at stake, and you're all on the same team, there's little excuse not to help your team member up so you can keep going together.



Here's the big problem: a project will suffer if the project manager doesn't correct their destructive behaviour. They can't do that if they can't recognize it. There's loads of literature encouraging the victims of bullying behaviour to stand up for themselves, and encouraging bystanders to intervene. But a project can't do those things—it's entirely dependent upon the choices the PM makes. If the Vulture doesn't start making better choices, another person will have to take action to remove the Vulture

from his or her position. That will further cost the project, due to the resulting reorganization.

In case Vultures are reading this and saying, “man-up, Geoff, it’s a harsh world out there...survival of the fittest, only the strong survive, *[insert tired Darwinian cliché here]*”, my response to you is this: “Swimming with sharks”? It’s OVER. Twitter, Facebook, Social Media, Instant News, Web 1.0/2.0/3.0, all of it connects us to so many others more than we ever have been before. We are living in times where our actions are very much on display for others to see and judge. The world is jaded. Since the thing that unites us first is our humanity, cruel and cold-blooded behaviour has no place anymore. If you believe these to be virtues, then in the face of your own evolutionary metaphors, I’d ask you: who’s the dinosaur?

*Original Post Date: June 4, 2010*

*URL: <http://edge.papercutpm.com/destructive-behaviours-hungry-vulture/>*

## 5// The Premature Solutioner

I'm going to preface this behaviour type with an easy-to-relate-to, very simple case study. This case study is real, and while the project was a video (and so had a producer rather than a project manager), the principles I'm about to discuss are the same, so I've swapped titles for simplicity.

CLIENT: I need to make a recruitment video.

PROJECT MANAGER: No problem I'll get right on it.

*Six weeks later with no dialogue between the client or project manager...*

PROJECT MANAGER: Here you go!

CLIENT: I don't like it. It's too...corporate. Here, change this and this and this and this and this and this and this and let's see it again.

PROJECT MANAGER: Okay.

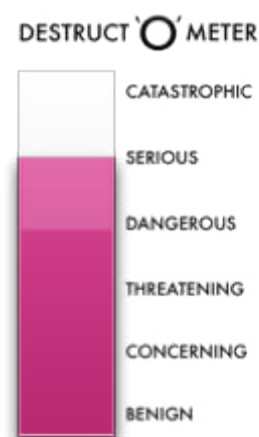
EDITOR (*a smart person who was in the elevator with the client one day*): What exactly are you trying to accomplish?

CLIENT: I want to show fresh grads the city and how exciting it is. I want them to feel that if they work with us they'll be able to live like someone off of "Friends".

EDITOR: So you don't want a recruitment video. You want a lifestyle video.

CLIENT: ZOMG YAH!

EDITOR: Give me one hour.



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So what happened? Well, first of all, the project manager didn't really talk to the client. Many project managers would claim that's unrealistic; there's normally dialogue between the PM and the client all the time. That's true, but here's the catch embedded in the dialogue: the client said she wanted a "recruitment video". She used a specific phrase that resonated with the project manager in a specific way, and rather than ignoring that phrase to go after higher-level details, the PM pursued it to create something the client didn't want. Because the project manager developed a solution prematurely, he felt he was justified moving the project straight into execution. In other words, *he jumped to conclusions*.

The project manager also assumed that the client was capable of articulating their wants. That assumption kills projects all the time. When a project sponsor initiates a project, they're generally (we hope) looking not just for a monkey to follow instructions, but for an arsenal of intelligence that's capable of looking beyond words, into the heart of the business need.



**"USE THIS. IT'S GOOD."**



### Consequences:

Premature Solutioners make others crazy. It's not just the clients who suffer. Everyone on the project team who has done any work on a solution that is inappropriate has to claw everything back and try to build a new solution based on whatever Frankenstein parts are left. The work has already been paid for, and now must be paid again. It doesn't matter what type of contract exists, or who's bearing what risk. Somebody, somewhere is paying for the rework.

### Dysfunction Junction

When a project team develops improper solutions, the resulting wasted expenditures inevitably turn to finger pointing. "You gave me bad requirements." "No, you weren't listening to what I wanted." My response in these situations (when I have the luxury of being an outside observer) is, "stop, Doublemint Twins, you're both right! Now fix it!" (at which point I glower imperiously).

In the face of the "he said / she said" argument over who's at fault, I will invariably side with the sponsor (unless there was deliberate deception but that's a different problem). The sponsor has approached the project

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manager to build a new product or service. That doesn't mean that the sponsor understands the nature of the work about to be undertaken, only that the work is relevant to the sponsor in some way. As such the sponsor will use language that makes sense to them, but may not make sense in the context of the project. I firmly believe it's the project manager's job to uncover the truth before work begins, and only then build a solution around the problems he or she discovers.

I've rated Premature Solutioners as Serious, because rework is a budget killer. You've paid for work once, that work was no good, so now

you have to pay for it again. If that happens too often on a project, the costs will soar out of control. The project will either be very late, or truckloads of scope will have to be mercilessly ripped out. Project quality can't stand up to that kind of decimation.



### Prevention:

The extant behaviour here is an impulsive tendency to jump to conclusions. In the case study I've used at the top, I've chosen a really fundamental example that may have been caught at the charter stage (no, the producer in question didn't make one). We don't need a high-level

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scope statement to keep us from jumping to conclusions, though. When a staff member comes to us with a problem in the cafeteria, or finance brings us a problem after a meeting...there are countless points during the course of our projects that a project manager who tends towards this kind

*Somebody, somewhere,  
is paying for the rework*

of behaviour could derail their project. It's true that a PM needs to be able to envision and articulate solutions quickly, *but the solutions need to be right.*

Premature Solutioners need to avoid the temptation to run with the first idea that jumps into their heads, and they need to ask lots of questions and probe for problems that lie beneath the language they hear.

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*URL: <http://edge.papercutpm.com/destructive-behaviours-premature-solutioner/>*

## 6// The Terrier

The poor Terrier really means well. Always searching, they are full of purpose. And when they recognize a problem, they will latch on to it tooth and nail, dissecting it and re-dissecting it until you wouldn't think there was another way you could possibly look at it. The trouble with Terriers is, they have a lot of trouble letting go. Even bigger trouble for Terriers is, while they're fixated, they can't see anything else that's going on.

Once they lock on to something, you'll likely have to pry it from their cold, dead hands before they'll relinquish it. While ownership is an incredibly valuable asset, a project manager doesn't have the luxury of taking ownership of one thing, at the expense of all the other things in their purview.



"HERE! HERE! HERE! HERE! HERE!"



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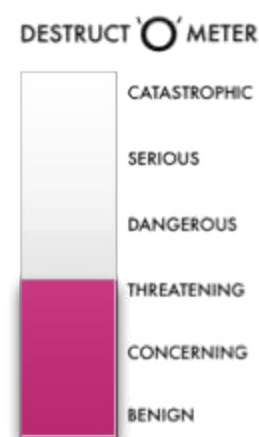
### Consequences:

The object of a Terrier's tenacity will likely be in great shape. The rest of the project unfortunately, can easily fall into shambles. Stakeholders whose issues aren't the focus of the Terrier's digging will feel the project manager doesn't care about them. Routine tasks like reporting and communications can fall to neglect. Boring work falls by the wayside and team members fall to confusion.

Luckily for Terriers, their behaviour is very obvious and it won't take long for someone who feels slighted to start making noise. From the project's perspective, if the Terrier isn't righted, others will usually pick up the slack because enough people are aware of the noise unhappy project members are making. That doesn't mean others' aggravation won't slow the project down, however. The Terrier needs to look after all facets of their project, and that includes the morale of unhappy stakeholders and teammates.

### Prevention:

Terriers need to remember that they're responsible for much more than one aspect of a project. While their



temptation to pursue one thing at a time may be overwhelming for them, they must resist their temptation to fixate.

Remember my advice for the Magpie? This is almost the opposite problem, but some of the remediating actions are the same. Terriers need to be much better organized, and improve their time management skills.

More than anything a Terrier can do to improve their behaviour though, is to always remember what their behaviour means. Here's a great monologue that Terriers might do well to keep in the back of their minds. If you find yourself exhibiting Terrier behaviour, remember Brian Cox' words from the 1996 movie, "The Long Kiss Goodnight". If you find you've gotten yourself to the point of Alice's dog, it's time to let go.

NATHAN: "Alice, please. The dog, Alice. It and my appetite are mutually exclusive."

ALICE: "Well, what's wrong with the dog?"

NATHAN: "Simple. He's been licking his asshole for the last three straight hours. I submit to you that there is nothing there worth more than an hour's attention. I should think that whatever he is attempting to dislodge is either gone for good, or there to stay. Wouldn't you agree?"

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## 7// The Wanderer

I'm bad for this one, and I find it a difficult behaviour to break. To all outside observers, you don't listen, and don't pay attention, even when a team member is trying to convey important news to you. The impression you convey is that you're thinking about irrelevant things.

If you're a Wanderer (like me), you know well that nothing could be further from the truth. While you might look like your mind is wandering, you're actually dealing with multiple crises in your head at the same time, and trying to sift through them at the same time you're trying to pay attention to what's happening around you. While your project team is waving their arms in front of you, and seemingly from a great distance shouting "hello! hello! Is anyone home?!", you're trapped inside your own head with multiple problems.



"I'M SORRY...DID YOU SAY  
SOMETHING?"



### Consequences:

The biggest concern of Wanderers is the impacts to those around them. Team members become frustrated when they don't believe they're being heard. That frustration can lead them to take matters into their own hands, and make uninformed or potentially damaging decisions on their own. As a leader of people, it's imperative that they can trust you enough to bring matters to your attention. When they do, you need to be there for them.

### Prevention:

The first thing you can do when someone is after your attention is to prepare your workspace to reduce the possibility of distraction. I've found this to work for me, and I'm notorious for this behaviour. First of all, arrange seating such that when someone approaches you, his or her seat and possible distractions like your computer monitor, phone, and desk area can't be in the same field of vision at the same time. That way, in order to look at a distracting element, you have to physically break contact with the person you're speaking with.

When someone approaches you, make a point of physically putting down a pen, mouse or phone, or close your laptop halfway. It doesn't really matter what you do, just make a deliberate, physical act of breaking with distracting elements. This act prepares you mentally to clear your mind of anything that isn't the person you're about to speak with. Sure, they may look at you a little oddly when you do this, but it's better than the alternative.

With physical distractions set away from you, the next step is to keep your mind clear. That's often difficult for a Wanderer because as their counter-party speaks, things they say will often trigger ideas in the Wanderer's mind, which he or she will start to pursue. To the counter-party, the Wanderer's eyes have glazed over and it's clear they're not listening anymore. Here are two tricks I have used to help with this:

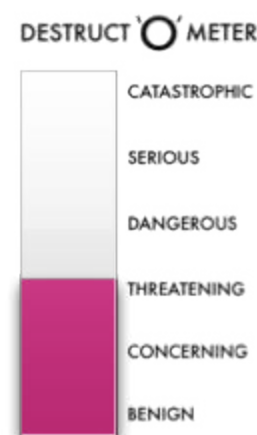
*"Hello...hello...  
Is anyone home?"*

1) When they sit down, find something on them like a button, or a hairpin or their watch. Anything really, just hopefully not near any...embarrassing spots. When you feel yourself starting to drift back into the miasma that is your brain, shift your eyes to that item and focus on it until you're able to come back to the land of the living. That's why you

## Nine Destructive Behaviours Project Leaders Need to Avoid

don't want to identify an item near their belt or chest (if it's a woman). An inappropriate prolonged stare can be...awkward. You need to identify the item at the start of the conversation or you won't have anything to mentally grab on to in the event something they say triggers churn in your mind.

2) Ask questions frequently. You need to understand what they're trying to communicate anyway, and questions are a necessity. As their tale unfolds, hold on to questions in your mind, and once there's an appropriate point, ask away. This keeps you present in the discussion.



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## 8// The Anticipator

Anticipators are very forward thinking. They can see impacts of actions and decisions that others can't. In a project management capacity, this trait makes them incredibly valuable. Unfortunately for them, their communication skills are often weak.


Anticipators aren't great at communicating what they see. They often assume that since something is clear and visible to them, it must be clear and visible to everyone else. As a result, Anticipators can be assumptive (not telling others what they see), or miscommunicate (either creating panic or not creating enough interest).



"I'M GOING TO HAVE TO SAVE THE  
WORLD. AGAIN."

This trait makes Anticipators feel very much isolated with their visions.





To give a nod to a recent article by Ty Kiisel of AtTask software, I'm going to dust off my own Greek Myth text. Cassandra was a mortal, beloved of the god Apollo. Because of her beauty, Apollo granted her the gift of prophecy: she could see into the future. Unfortunately Cassandra didn't return his love (you'd think the mortals would learn not to upset the gods), so instead of taking his gift back, he cursed her such that whenever she spoke of her predictions, nobody would believe her. When Troy fell in exactly the same manner as her vision, she went insane because nobody had listened.

Bummer for Cassandra.

### Consequences:

The project manager needs to be able to look into the future. It's an incredibly valuable skill to look beyond a seemingly small, inconsequential decision, through the chain reaction of events that decision will trigger, to the results.

But the project manager can't stop there. Whatever the project manager sees, it's imperative he or she be able to effectively communicate that vision to the project team. If they can't or don't, there will be nothing



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to stem the tide of events, and the consequences will come to pass. It's unfortunate, but only the person with sight is in a position to take action.

Here's a few possible ways the Anticipator can deliver their messages of "the future" and the likely responses from other team members who don't yet see things the way the project manager does:

MESSAGE DELIVERY	MESSAGE RECEIPT
Alarmist	Too many of these and the recipients will start to think of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf"
Lukewarm	Not enough emphasis placed on the seriousness of the consequences and nobody's likely to do anything
Cautionary	Halfway in between but still may not get action unless a plan is put on the table. It's one thing to raise an issue, it's another to ask for help to stem it.

### Prevention:

While Cassandra may have had a curse placed on her, most of us project managers aren't that cool (although you could argue that the very fact we can see what's coming is a curse in itself). In addition to their powers of foresight, Anticipators need to develop effective communication and influencing skills.

Stakeholders, team members and everyone else need to be able to trust the project manager's visions. That's a product of trust in the project manager. Blowing into a meeting room screaming, "the sky is falling" isn't likely to get you a lot of positive attention on the important issues.

Constant, regular communication is a much more effective way of getting focus on the right details, and it also allows others to accompany you on your visions. As you start to assemble the pieces yourself, others get to watch you do it, and they're never far away. So when you reach

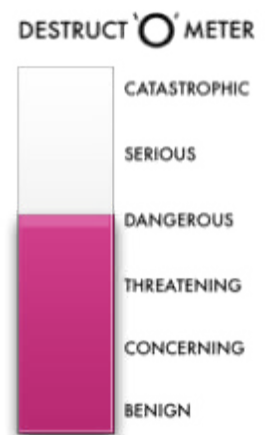
*One man (or woman) cannot own the future by himself (or herself).* your conclusions, people saw how they evolved, They'll be far less likely to presume you just jumped to them.

Stakeholders need to see project managers regularly raising issues before they're likely to begin to trust that the project manager's issues are valid. That's not to say the project manager should raise each and every single issue, but I have yet to see a project where I don't go a week without needing a stakeholder's help on something. My policy in my status reports is to raise the top three issues each week and present those. If my people don't report three relevant issues to me each week I go looking, because I don't believe them.

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The last thing the Anticipator needs is the ability to truthfully say, “I’ve communicated the message and I’ve done the best I can.” At that point my friend, you need to realize that you’re only one man or woman—you cannot own the future by yourself.

Keep that in mind, and what happened to Cassandra doesn’t have to happen to you.



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## 9// The Reluctant Puppet

Here we come to, what I believe, is the single most destructive behaviour any project manager can demonstrate. The Reluctant Puppet is a project manager who wants to run a project the way he or she knows how, but who allows well-meaning stakeholders, sponsors or their own management to railroad them into a different approach.

On the surface, this behaviour sounds fairly benign. Everyone's well meaning, and everybody wants to get along. It seems very easy to give in once for the sake of keeping the waters smooth, but the problem is, it's never once. Once the precedent is set, the behaviour becomes expected.


### Consequences:

Reluctant Puppets sit on a vicious cycle of micromanagement and erosion. Every time they allow themselves to be steered out of familiar waters, they have to do a lot more work to be able to stay afloat.



"BUT...I.....SIGH."

## Nine Destructive Behaviours Project Leaders Need to Avoid



This causes the puppeteers to become irritated with the resulting lower performance, and start micromanaging. The puppet's confidence starts to slip away, which causes the puppeteers start to lose respect for him or her, micromanaging even more intensely.

There is no happy ending to this cycle. The stakeholders, sponsors and management will become too exasperated with someone they will come to see as utterly incompetent. The project manager will come to question his or her own capabilities, leading to employment risk, and possibly some serious mental health issues. The project team will be directionless, and the project will either stall or have to undergo a massive makeover to enable it to continue.

### Prevention:

It may not seem like it, but the project manager is the only person who can prevent this from happening.

During the selection process, for whatever reason, the powers-that-be chose the project manager for the job. It's possible the project manager misrepresented him or herself (that's the first level of

## Nine Destructive Behaviours Project Leaders Need to Avoid

responsibility). But assuming the project manager was genuine, he or she was selected based on the information available to the decision-makers.

Once the work starts, management will get to know the project manager and will start to form better opinions. Maybe they don't like the project manager's methods or style now that they've seen it. Maybe they find they don't even like the PM as a person. Their temptation to steer the project to a more familiar or comfortable direction will grow based on the amount of discomfort they feel. That's their problem: the project manager needs to remember that. There is no law that says a PM has to be universally liked to be effective. But the project manager does need to stick to their comfort zone. With the massive quantities of unknown present on any project, the project manager can't afford to throw away the one thing he or she does know.



If flustered and nervous managers or stakeholders insist on pulling the project manager away from their methods, the PM needs to sit down with them and be clear: "You've hired me to do a job, and I'm doing it the way I know how. If I step outside of my comfort zone to please you, the

project will suffer. So we need to make a few decisions on how to get past this.”

That may mean the project manager needs to walk away from the project. If that’s the right thing to do, my friend, I’m afraid that’s what needs to happen. But the vicious downward spiral that is the alternative will never get a chance to develop. At least not with you.

*This vicious cycle can lead to employment risk and serious mental health issues*

While it takes longer term thinking, the puppeteers will likely railroad someone else, and wind up with a struggling project. That project manager will probably have to leave, so who do you think the puppeteers will come back to when they realize the prediction you gave them before you walked away came to pass?

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