

Managing Projects: Expert Solutions to Everyday Challenges

Mary Grace Duffy, Ed. D. , founding partner of Cambridge Hill Partners, Inc.

Reviewed by James R. Brady

Audience and Purpose

The "Pocket Mentor" series of books from Harvard claims to offer "immediate solutions to common problems which managers face on the job everyday." The mentor (author? editor? or contributor?) for the project management book is Mary Grace Duffy, Ed. D. , founding partner of Cambridge Hill Partners, Inc. and adjunct faculty member of the Harvard University Extension School and Simmons Graduate School of Management. She suggests that many common organizational activities can be viewed as projects and therefore many people are "project managers," whether or not they may have the title. In short, the audience for the book is defined as broadly as possible.

The book claims that it will "help you build on your strengths, identify and fill in gaps in skills, and give you a clear and organized path to follow—a must for every project manager." (page x) The author notes that the typical project has four distinct phases: (1) Planning, (2) Build-up, (3) Implementation, and (4) Phase-out. However, the book also recognizes that these phases will overlap and the project manager must therefore be flexible in adjusting approaches to meet changing conditions.

Reviewer's Comments

I bought the book primarily as a "refresher reference" and one which I could read in a relatively short time. While it met my criteria for brevity, this characteristic may also be the reason why the discussions sometimes seem superficial and disjointed. The "real-life examples" touted on the book cover are often too brief to provide much learning value. A key summary chapter is entitled "How to manage the problems," but the sample problem is vaguely defined. A project apparently cannot deliver its products because an external supplier has failed to deliver them.

However, most of the checklist items included for solving this problem cover generic **internal project team functioning**, not solutions for dealing with inept suppliers. (pages 69-72). One wonders if this and other books in the various Harvard Press "series" suffer from a committee approach to writing and editing. A personal peeve is that the very small print fonts used for many tables and charts in the book make them difficult to read. If limiting the overall number of pages is an issue, I suggest eliminating the meaningless stock photos and blank pages and then using the saved space for larger and more readable graphics.

For me, the stronger sections of this book are those dealing with (1) design and start-up issues and (2) the need to objectively evaluate and learn from the project's end results. There is considerable stress on ensuring up front that all key stakeholders (a) clearly understand the basic problem(s) to be addressed by the project and (b) commit themselves to perform their assigned roles. Project success is sometimes seen as the responsibility of more junior managers, so more specific performance commitments by senior managers might improve implementation. This would certainly seem to be a critical need in organizations where the project approach is dominant.

To sum up, the book does not cover new ground, but does include some good tips for maintaining and improving basic project management skills. Consequently, it could be useful as a training handout or reference to introduce inexperienced team members to some common project management issues.

(Harvard Business School Press Pocket Mentor, 2006; (100 pages, paperback, \$9.95)

Reviewer Rating of this book (out of 5):  — James R. Brady, 07/31/2006