



# WISDOM OF THE AGES

We can learn from those who have gone before us.

BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP,  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**W**hile working on my new book, I interviewed 25 United States citizens aged 67 to 87 who roughly represent the ethnic, religious, economic and social groups that make up the country. I found their hard-earned lessons, shared below, to correlate well with the needs of becoming more effective project leaders.

**“BE DELIBERATE WITH YOUR LIFE.** Your life and what you make of it is up to you. Don’t just let it happen to you. Be deliberate in the decisions that you make and the paths that they lead you to.”

Project leaders must be proactive—making things happen—rather than reactive—waiting for people and events to stir them. Take the initiative to work with stakeholders to discover problems before they can cause unrecoverable harm.

**“START YOUR DAY WITH QUIET TIME.** My day always seems to go better when I start it with some quiet time for meditation. This quiet time helps me set my energy level, think about what I want to accomplish, get in touch with who I am and confirm who I choose to be.”

Plan your workday early to the best of your ability. Then manage to your top three priorities; they define your contributions, value and overall success.

**“LOOK FORWARD.** Don’t live your life looking in the rear-view mirror. When you make a mistake—big or small—don’t sit there and kick yourself forever. Do what you need to do to recover, learn from it and move on.”

Let go of past project failures—but learn from them first. Admit mistakes, demonstrate accountability in correcting them, be professional to ensure they are not repeated and then move on to channeling your energy in the present.

**“DO THE RIGHT THING.** You know you are doing the right thing when you feel it in your very soul. Doing these things helps me feel whole, connected and fulfilled.”

Listen to your inner voice—your instincts—and treat it as the wise and trusted friend it is. Take the appropriate action at the appropriate time: It may be speaking up on an issue, initiating a work or escalation meeting, or making a proper but unpopular business decision.

**“DON’T BLAME ‘THE SYSTEM’** or allow it to limit you. If you are not content with your success in life, do not blame the system around you; instead, look inward for a solution.”

While no one has absolute control over the outcome of events, we have far more influence than many leaders choose to believe. As project leader, you must ensure proper adherence to factors that affect the health and success of the project, such as a satisfactory change control process, communications and issue mitigation. Change happens because someone chooses to make it happen. Be a catalyst.

**“ENJOY THINGS AS YOU GO.** Don’t put off the fun things until later. Later can have a habit of never arriving.”

Celebrating the successful completion of a milestone is motivating and exciting, and helps the team to bond. It’s a great way to promote a culture that encourages the best from people and shows its appreciation of their contributions.

As leaders, we can benefit from listening to the wisdom gained from those who have gone before us. The best leaders take deliberate actions, demonstrate discipline, learn from the past (but live in the present), listen to their instincts, take accountability for mistakes, care about the team, make time to have fun and believe in their own ability to make things happen. Is this you? If not, it can be! **PM**



Neal Whitten, PMP, president of The Neal Whitten Group, is a speaker, trainer, consultant and mentor. His newest book is *The Gift of Wisdom: Lessons for a Lifetime*.