

THREE SNAPS OF THE FINGERS

Here's the real reason why projects fail.

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Theories abound on why so many projects fail. For me, it comes down to how quickly you can answer one question: What are your project's top three problems?

If you can't identify them within three snaps of your fingers, then you're not an effective leader. You're focusing on the minutia, the noise, the interruptions that come your way throughout the day. Truly effective leaders must stay focused on the priorities that offer the greatest ROI—and you aren't doing this.

Over the years, I've conducted reviews on scores of troubled projects. In every case, the top problems of these projects should have been addressed weeks, months and sometimes years earlier. Instead, the project manager allowed the most important problems to drift.

Don't Waste Your Time

To maintain focus, begin your day with a to-do list and put your top three problems right at the top. Say your list has 10 items. If you end the day having not worked on any of your top three, but manage to cross off your bottom seven, you shouldn't feel good about your efforts. You worked on the wrong things. If, instead,

when your day ended, you didn't work on any of your bottom seven but made significant progress on just one of your top three, then you've truly accomplished something.

When is it okay to work on the bottom seven? If you have a few minutes between meetings, then go for it. Early in my career, I reserved one hour each day to work off my bottom seven. Bad idea. Instead, I should have devoted that treasured, concentrated time to my top three problems.

Make It Quick

The problems in your top-three list should be worked off within days, not weeks or months. If you have a problem that may take six weeks to resolve, create a plan for a plan. Assign someone to own the problem and create a "mini plan" that identifies the activities and tasks, durations, dependencies, dates, people responsible, etc. Once that's approved, move it into your overall project plan and track it weekly.

If you have more than one project, then you should know the top three problems on each project. If you have three projects, for example, you need to identify your top nine problems each morning (or the night before). Then cull through the nine and identify your top three that will be your primary focus for the day.

Concentrating on your top three problems each day is the single most important action that you can take on a project, yet most "leaders" fail to embrace this essential practice.

Do *you* know your top three? *PM*

Neal Whitten, PMP, president of The Neal Whitten Group, is a speaker, trainer, consultant, mentor and author. His latest book is Neal Whitten's Let's Talk! More No-Nonsense Advice for Project Success—Over 700 Q&As.

