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Book Review of Practical Project Management for Agile Nonprofits: Approaches and Templates to Help You Manage With Limited Resources

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Practical Project Management for Agile Nonprofits: Approaches and Templates to Help You Manage With Limited Resources

Karen R. J. White, 2013. West Chester, PA: Maven House Press. 162 pages. [ISBN: 978-1-9385-4800-0]

Project management is essential in today's working environment. Businesses, nonprofit organizations, and foundations around the globe utilize project-management principles to run their operations, launch products, raise funds, and build capacity. It is important for these organizations to identify individuals with project-management skills to put these techniques into practice. Effective project managers are efficient in their work and in directing the work of others, good communicators, able to lead without interfering in process, and cognizant of the scope, risks, and rewards of their projects.

The Project Management Institute (PMI), which provides primary research and training to the project-management field, defines a project as "temporary in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources." PMI continues, "A project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal" (PMI Institute, 2013). Project management is defined by PMI as "the application of knowledge, skills, and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently. It's a strategic competency for organizations, enabling them to tie project results to business goals" (PMI Institute, 2013). In other words, project management is a group of individuals working together efficiently to reach a short- or long-term goal.

The world of project management is fraught with tight timelines, limited resources, conflict-

ing viewpoints among team members, and many other obstacles. It is key for project managers to know how to negotiate these potential hazards while maintaining the integrity of their projects and delivering a final product that is in line with the initial vision. In project management, the ability to work productively with team members who have different objectives while meeting various deliverables and milestones is essential. Working with a team of volunteers while managing these items can be even more complicated.

Nonprofits with limited resources and no training in project management face great challenges in meeting PMI's standards. Karen R.J. White's book, *Practical Project Management for Agile Nonprofits: Approaches and Templates to Help You Manage With Limited Resources*, aims to support these organizations by describing practices specifically for nonprofits with limited project-management skills and resources. She provides a useful overview of project-management practices, volunteer management, and nonprofit governance, and proposes best practices for navigating through the life of a project.

After an opening description of the changing nature of nonprofits in a globalized environment, *Practical Project Management* defines projects, project management, and what makes a nonprofit agile. The next section focuses on good practices in volunteer management. Finally, White describes good governance practices in managing projects for nonprofits. She covers a lot of ground,

but breaks the book up into digestible pieces and delivers complex information in clear and concise language that is easily accessible to a novice.

White's examples are relevant and project managers will find her project-planning templates useful in their everyday work. While her examples focus heavily on event planning rather than managing program evaluations, the development of tools, or creation of new products, professionals will be able to adapt White's templates and process descriptions to their own projects. White also does an excellent job of describing the importance of volunteers and how to manage and recognize them effectively, information that many organizations will find beneficial.

White emphasizes the importance of planning, but also of limiting over-planning at the start of a project and of remaining flexible enough to change course midstream. On this point, she quotes Maggie Starvish in Harvard Business School's weekly newsletter: "Stable teams that plan first and execute later are increasingly infeasible in the twenty-first century workforce" (p. 78). However, the number of templates and documents White describes, as well as some of her examples, could suggest that planning first and executing later is necessary for effective project management. This may be unrealistic for organizations with limited resources – particularly for those with limited time, which is a particularly acute issue when relying on volunteers.

Many of White's approaches to organizing work could be cumbersome in practical application, especially for volunteers (and she does acknowledge some limitations). One of White's suggestions, employing a project wallboard or a SharePoint site, could be difficult to manage if space is tight or volunteers have limited access to technology. Daily stand-up meetings, another suggestion, may not be feasible when working with volunteers instead of staff. Repeatable templates, another of White's techniques, are great for consistency across projects and communicating progress with time-pressed executives, but leadership must follow up on them. White also suggests project notebooks – a good practice to be sure, but one

that often involves paperwork that may not be useful or referred to again over the life of the project.

White briefly discusses how technology can assist in project management, but does not devote much space to the available software. Resource-strapped nonprofits would benefit from a good review of these products, including their cost and usefulness to various project types. Instead, White focuses on how to use social media to help manage a project. While social media is a great way to get the word out about an event or product, only Google Sites is particularly useful in helping with actual project management.

White's book is an excellent introduction to project management, particularly planning and carrying out events, and offers a succinct overview of volunteer management that can help organizations retain quality volunteers. Practical Project Management is also a useful resource for foundations to share with grantees that need to improve their project-management skills but lack the resources or need for a staff position devoted to the work. Nonprofits can take White's practical planning advice and management frameworks and adapt them to their own needs.

References

PROJECT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE INC. (2013). *What is project management?* Available online at <http://www.pmi.org/About-Us/About-Us-What-is-Project-Management.aspx>

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