APPENDIX 2
A VIRTUAL WEEK IN THE LIFE OF AN EFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGER

So, now that we are trained in NLP, when and where do we put it into practice in the management of projects? Every place and every time. Let's look at a virtual diary of an effective project manager who is starting to put all of this into practice over the course of a working week…

Monday Morning

On my way into work this morning I was thinking about the challenges facing me this week as the project nears the end of a crucial phase. Fortunately, I had some good 'me time' over the weekend with family and friends and felt happy and well rested. I carried the positive mood with me on to the client's site and was met in turn with a warm response.

As usual, we started off the working week with a meeting of the different parties working on the project. Rather than just invite my immediate team, I now try to include a wide variety of parties to get as many perspectives as I can on what needs to be done, and agreement on good ways of going about it. Some of the users have commented to me that they now appreciate all the work that goes into getting the project delivered and have gone out of their way to be more helpful. (It seems our old page on the intranet wasn't getting to most of them, though some appear to visit it regularly.) People used to turn up late for meetings, or skip them at the last minute, but since we drew up a team charter together everyone seems to play by the rules. (Of course there was one individual who tested our rules, but a private conversation to enforce our agreement seems to have resolved that smoothly.) Since Paul had expressed an interest in developing his leadership skills, I asked him prior to the meeting if he would facilitate the meeting. (I find that getting someone else to facilitate gives me the opportunity to listen and observe more, and pick up on some of the things that are not being said.) But first I did my usual overview of the breadth of the project and what was going well. We kept a separate note of anything that sounded like a risk or an issue to enter into the logs for review later. I concluded the meeting by summarising what was going well, what challenges we faced together, and what we had each agreed to do. I thanked everyone for their efforts. (One of the team had been very quiet in the meeting, so I had a brief word afterwards, but it turned out to be a personal matter – they thanked me for noticing anyway.)

I had arranged a meeting with a senior user that some of the staff had complained to me about. I feel that it is important to show the staff that I am there to support them and back them up. I used to invite people over to my office to save me time, but now I have got into the habit of going over to their workplace – this gives me

a mental anchor of 'visiting their map of the world'. I have a lot to get through this week and felt quite rushed, but I wanted to give him my full attention, so I imagined stepping on to an imaginary timeline as I crossed the threshold of his door so that I could be more 'in time' – I find that it is much easier to concentrate on the other person in this state. Rather than getting straight down to my issues, I like to ask stakeholders what's happening in their world. (It turns out that big efficiency targets have been announced in Operations and they are taking staff cuts – probably why my people have been complaining that staff have not been released for workshops. I am sure that there is an accommodation to be found, perhaps if I pay for overtime to cover the time for training from the project budget. I will speak to the Sponsor about it.) I didn't use to like the guy that much, but we discovered at a team ice-breaker that we studied the same subject at university and we seem to have connected a lot better since then. (I am always amazed at where chemists turn up.) He uses a lot of 'doing' words, so I find it is easier if I talk to him in similar language rather than stick to my own visual expressions. It seems to strike a chord, and we both agreed to 'get on with it'. (I mentally stepped back off my timeline as I left his office as I had some other appointments to get to.)

Tuesday

We got together today for a workshop to update the risks and issues logs. First we reviewed the log of our assumptions, constraints, and dependencies. Had our world changed? Not as far as we knew, but I will check them with the project Sponsor when I meet him later in the week, as I am not aware of all that is happening across the business. I try to be upbeat in most meetings, but for the first half of these meetings I try to become a 'miss-matcher' and find reasons why things may not work. I usually like to be 'big picture' – a bit like the conductor of an orchestra, but for this session I wanted to be 'in the pits' with the players, so I adopted detailed behaviour so that I could understand peoples' concerns more easily. Having sounded out a range of pessimistic and optimistic scenarios, we agreed on a fairly realistic picture of the health of the project. I will run this by the Sponsor on my regular weekly meeting to hear if this matches his perception. One of the actions has not been updated – I will go around to see the action owner, as we had agreed for our team charter that we would all update our actions by Friday every week. Not many of them used to get updated at first, but now that they know that it is expected they conform most of the time. It saves all the chasing we used to have to do.

I have to go over to a supplier's offices today. They have not sent anyone to the team meeting or risk workshop for two weeks. I used to send an email and copy in their boss, but I realised that this behaviour never seemed to work. I could see that they were stressed and I commented that they looked tired. They confirmed that they had all been working late and weekends to recover another project. It turns out that they had not captured all of the client's change requests and now had to do a lot of re-work. I understood why my project was down his list of priorities. I agreed to cut him some slack on the provision that he would chair our monthly review of change requests – I wanted everyone to realise that we were not doing it for the sake of bureaucracy. I find that a lot of the staff like to hear theory and lessons first hand rather than go on a lot of training in methods, so I try to get people to pass on their experiences as much as I can.

I used to think that lunch was for wimps, but on my way back to the client's site I stopped off for lunch in the park. I have a relaxation tape that I play on my iPod and after twenty minutes I feel really relaxed, which restores perspective on my day.

I met with the new client who had a reputation for being antagonistic. His secretary kept me waiting and when he called me in he was assertive to the point of aggression. To that point I had been quite calm, which at least helped me to listen more and pick up the fact that he was 'hearing' a lot of 'noises' that he didn't like the 'sound' of. Although I did not match his aggression, I matched my tone to his and moved my breathing up to the middle of my chest where aurally oriented people tend to breath from, giving my breathing a similar pace to his. I didn't bother to ask him if he had read the progress report. I chose my words carefully, as I figured that they were important to him. I started out by reminding him that we all wanted a successful outcome from this partnership. I told him what had happened, what went well, what the challenges were, and asked him for his advice on helping to resolve them. He spoke at some length, giving me his opinions on the world while I dutifully nodded and made mental notes. I asked him what would make him sound happy about the project. He responded that it would be when his staff told him that things were ticking over properly. When he had finished giving me an ear bashing, he thanked me for coming to see him. I thanked him and made a mental note to update the communications plan to do a regular walk around the staff offices. (From experience I was confident that he would be much less aggressive next time, now that he was being listened to.)

Wednesday

We have a planning meeting today for the next project. I am good at the tools and used to knock these up myself and post them out to the team, but found it difficult to get people to update them. Now I like to get representatives from each of the groups in the room when I pull them together. It takes a bit of skill to stop everyone going straight into the detail – I use a 'chunking technique' to bring those people up to a high level and then travel back down the work-breakdown structure together. It really helps to get the dependencies aligned and have everyone understand the impact of any delays that they introduced. We used to encounter an optimism bias too, in that people would say when things could be done, but when challenged these were always best case scenarios assuming that the project was highest priority and fully resourced. Either that or else they put so much fat into the estimate that they were under no pressure themselves. We use a three point estimating method for activities now: an earliest realistic completion date, a last acceptable date, and an average or likely date given real world pressures. This seems to get the optimists and the pessimists on the same page and produce realistic plans that people can sign up to. Funny, but having had a hand in creating the top-down plan, people seem easier to persuade into updating their progress as they seem to want to see how things turn out themselves.

I take one of the guys out for lunch to discuss his personal development plan. He wants to be promoted and knows that the best way to do this is to keep improving his competence and experience. (He also wants to become a chartered practitioner and knows that this is now competence-based and experienced-based.) We work

back from his goals to get a realistic timeline for his personal achievements – a bit like planning his own personal project. I give him feedback on specifics that he has been working on, emphasising the positives and pointing to what would make him even more effective. I also suggest someone for him to observe and try to model them for one area where he is having difficulty.

Thursday

I have a meeting with the finance department today. I have been asked to update the business plan, but I am not sure why they need all these tables and numbers. If we are on time then we are to budget, and if we are late then it costs money, simple as that in my map of the world. Rather than tell them about my world, however, I confess that all the spreadsheets and the finance system leave me a bit bewildered and I do not give them the priority that I maybe should. They say that at least my projects are running to cost, so I must be doing something right. I tell them that I am very careful to get a realistic plan and robust estimates, and then just track those. They say that if I show them how I put my estimates together then they will translate them to their format. Apparently they need them in this standard format so that they can consolidate figures across all projects to report up to the CFO, who uses them to make sure that we have sufficient cash-flow in the company to pay our salaries. They even offer to show me how to check the progress of orders using the on-line financial system, so that I know if they are delayed or not. I may start to let one of them come to the project team meetings – if they promise to leave Excel behind.

Now that I have all my financial information sorted I can finish drafting the progress report. I like to use highlights and exceptions, but some people just can't seem to get enough detail, so I update standard tables as appendices. One of the senior users likes me to use 'smiley/sad' faces – it keeps her happy and lets everyone know at a glance how we are doing. I will run my draft past the Sponsor before I send it out, as she will do an upward briefing to other directors and it is good to sing from the same hymn sheet, as we have some stakeholders who can be difficult if they are not actively managed. Some of the staff don't seem to read email so I always give the highlights at key meetings the following week to make sure everyone is on message.

Friday

I have lunch with my boss to discuss my performance. I am lucky in that she is responsible for developing the project management capability across the company. I tell her what things I am happy with and where I think that I could improve. I tell her that I am not comfortable with Finance and we discuss options. I suggest that I could get someone in to help me, or go on a training course. She proposes instead that I meet with one of her other project managers who comes from a finance background and get him to mentor me in this aspect. She asks that I offer to facilitate some risk workshops for him in return, as his risk log never quite matches reality. She suggests that I move my desk to the finance department while I am focussing on finance, to get a better understanding of their world. She also reports back that the new client said that he liked what I had to say.

At lunchtime I go for a run. I never used to make the time and often felt too tired, but now I find that I actually have more energy and even sleep better. A virtuous circle really.

After lunch I meet with the project sponsor. I mentioned that we had reviewed the assumptions log and asked if there were any changes that we might need to accommodate. He replied not, but that we were in changing times, so we should review them regularly. I emailed the draft progress report over last night to give him time to read it, but I will go through it anyway. He wants me to make more of the issues that we are facing, as some people think that we are over-resourced and he is worried about being another project failure. We agree to add a pictorial 'probability impact grid' to provide an overview of the number and magnitude of risks, but to colour code them to show that they are generally under control with this level of resource. I mention the meeting with the client and ask for some casual support in convincing them and other stakeholders that we are doing this *for* them, and not *to* them. (He tells me that they play in the same jazz band, and that he is a nice chap when you get to know him.) I also mention the conversation with Operations about people not turning up to workshops, and ask if we can pay overtime to mitigate the issue. He tells me to speak to Finance about it to see if we have scope, but says that finance have warned him that my Business Case may be late. I report that I have met with them to ask for help and that my boss has also appointed a mentor to help me with it. He says he feels well informed and reasonably assured. We exchange pleasantries about our plans for the week-end, I go back to my office, make the agreed changes and send out the report. He used to want to check it again after changes, but now seems to trust me.

I review my week: what I have accomplished, what challenges I have faced, and what I have learned. I make a list of things to do for the next week and then go home to my family for some serious R&R. And there are those that say the life of a project manager is an unrewarding and stressful one – only if we let it be.