The Lawless PM

How to Break the Laws of Project Management and Get Away Scot-Free

Kevin O'Neill - Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis

November 21st 2025

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE

AACSB ACCREDITED

WELCOME.

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE

Disclaimer!!

I am not advocating that you violate any criminal statue or any tenant of the PMI Code of Ethics. I am merely arguing that the maxims of project management that have guided PMs for decades can in some instances be bent or broken if you understand them and are creative in your approach.

Overview

- Project management is full of “laws’ – like Brook’s Law, Hofstadter’s Law and Parkinson’s Law – that are often treated as unbreakable truths. These principles have become part of the project manager’s lexicon, shaping the way we plan, estimate and execute work. But what if these rules are not as ironclad as they seem? What if you could break them strategically, intentionally and not only avoid disaster, but drive success?
- In this session, we’ll explore the origins and intent behind some of the most well-known project management laws. More importantly, we’ll examine real-world examples where these rules were bent or broken, and it worked. You’ll learn how to creatively navigate difficult projects, when and how to challenge conventional wisdom and how to pull off “lawless’ project management without getting burned.
- Whether you’re a seasoned PM or just learning the ropes, this session will challenge you to think differently about the “rules” and empower you to break them… responsibly.

Laws that Define Project Management

- Brooks' Law: Adding resources to a late project makes it later
- Parkinson's Law: Work expands to fill the time available for its completion
- Conway's Law – Organizations that design a system will produce a design whose structure is a copy of the organization's communication structure
- Hofstadter's Law: It always takes longer than you expect—even when you expect it to
- Linus' Law: Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow
- Goodhart's Law: When a measure becomes a target it ceases to be a good measure
- 90 – 90 Rule: The first 90% of the project takes 90% of the time and the last 10% takes the other 90%

The Intent Behind the Laws

- Warn against common project mistakes
- Encourage realism in planning
- Reinforce communication and alignment
- Create structure in chaos

What is Brooks' Law

- Adding more resources to a late project makes it later
- Introduced with Brooks' 1975 book, "The Mythical Man-Month" where he observed that it takes time for new resources to become productive
- Why?
  - More people require more training taking critical resources off key tasks and increases task switching
  - More team members means an increase in the number of lines of communication which adds complexity and further slows progress
  - Tasks can only be broken down so far before you begin experiencing diminishing returns

Breaking Brooks' Law

- Choose Quality over Quantity if you must increase the size of the team
- Slot new team members into less complex tasks that minimize training requirements like defect remediation
- Look for improvements in work distribution and work streams
- Front load testing by adding Quality Engineers to pull testing to the right
- Appoint a single resource trainer to bring the new resources up to speed instead of relying on the entire team
- Put the new resources on a separate team with a micro-lead to guide the work
- Mix and match from the above and find the right balance of strategies

What is Parkinson's Law

- When you give a task more time than it needs, that task will expand to fit the time
- Introduced in a humorous essay published in The Economist in 1955
- 3 primary psychological reasons why…
  - Safety Net Syndrome: When given more time we tend to slow down or overthink and build in time for revisions
  - Procrastination: When the pressure isn't on, we are less motivated to start
  - Scope Creep: With more time, people start adding unnecessary extras to a task

Breaking Parkinson's Law

- Set realistic but challenging deadlines
- Use time-boxing
- Break tasks into smaller milestones
- Leverage accountability
- When it might be ok to break Parkinson's Law
  - Creative tasks
  - Complex problem-solving
  - Just ensure that the extra time is providing genuine value and not drifting into scope creep

What is Conway's Law

- The way your teams are structured determines the design of your product
  - If your company has siloed teams with poor communication, you will have disjointed and inefficient products
- Computer programmer first observed this pattern in 1967
- How organizational structures drive projects…
  - Silos create fragmented products
  - Org charts dictate system complexity
  - Communication gaps lead to inefficiencies

Breaking Conway's Law

- Organize teams around the desired architecture
  - Define ideal system first, then structure the teams
- Increase cross-team collaboration
- Use team topologies to align structure with goals
  - Stream-aligned teams – End to end customer value
  - Enabling teams – help others adopt better practices
  - Complicated subsystem teams – specialized work
  - Platform teams – support developers with internal tools
- Encourage open communication channels

What is Hofstadter's Law

- Things always take longer than expected… even when you account for Hofstadter's Law
- Coined by cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter in 1979, it is a recursive truth that reflects on our inability to accurately predict how long complex tasks take
- Why humans are so bad at estimating…
  - Optimism Bias
  - Unknown Unknowns
  - Overreliance on best-case scenarios
  - Planning Fallacy

Breaking Hofstadter's Law

- Use historical data
- Factor in buffers
- Break down tasks into smallest component
- Use three-point or relative estimation techniques
- Revisit and reassess
- What to do when the above fails
  - Prioritize ruthlessly
  - Optimize resources
  - Increase communication
  - Use parallel workstreams

What is Linus' Law

- "Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow."
- With enough people reviewing the code, any flaws or bugs will be identified and fixed quickly
- Born out of open-source software development
- Why it can be problematic…
  - Too many cooks in the kitchen
  - Diluted accountability
  - Communication overload
  - Groupthink and compromised innovation
  - Burden of coordination

Breaking Linus' Law

- How can small agile teams break Linus's law without ballooning in size?
- Automate testing
- Decrease feedback loops with customer
- Build and release in smaller deliverables
- Incorporate periodic cross team peer reviews and paired programming
- Leverage diverse expertise in reviews
- Encourage open communication

What is Goodhart's Law

- "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."
- The metrics stops being useful because behavior changes to game the metric
- An economist, originally used this idea to criticize monetary policy
- Why…
  - The metric becomes a performance target for teams
  - People start optimizing for the metric, not the actual goal
  - Becomes a box checking exercise to keep leadership pacified

Breaking Goodhart's Law

- Use metrics as a guide, not a target
- Balance quantitative and qualitative data
- Encourage the right behavior – Use first-contact resolution and customer feedback over "close X tickets per day" metrics
- Regularly review and adapt metrics
- Use multiple complementary metrics (escaped defects, rework percentage and customer satisfaction)

What is the 90 – 90 Rule

- The first 90% of a projects takes 90% of the time… and the last 10% takes the other 90%
- A tongue in cheek way to explain why while in the final stretch tasks drag on, approvals take longer, and finish line keeps moving
- Credited to Tom Cargill of Bell Labs as not an actual mathematical formula, but a joke with a hard truth
- Why…
  - Unseen complexity
  - Task Underestimation
  - Scope Creep
  - Perfectionism

Breaking the 90 – 90 Rule

- Define “Done” clearly and early
- Deliver incrementally, not all at once
- Build in “False Finish Lines”
- Buffer the last 10%, because it is never just 10%
- Prevent “Last-Minute Perfectionism” – Identify “Must Haves” vs “Nice to Haves”

Before Breaking the Rules

Ask yourself:

- Is the law limiting creativity or progress?
- What assumptions do I have?
- Do I understand the risk I'm taking?
- Are there opportunities of which I can take advantage?
- Can I build safeguards around the exception?

The Responsible Rebel

- Learn the rule
- Understand the purpose
- Do honest assessments of the situation
- Look at the problem from multiple angles
- Test small
- Communicate clearly
- Document outcomes

Challenge the Rulebook, Own the Outcome

- Laws exist for a reason—but they aren't ironclad
- Breaking them isn't about chaos, it's about creativity
- Being a great "Lawless" PM means knowing when to follow—and when to lead differently

Questions?

To discuss more project management:

- Connect with me on LinkedIn
- Check out my PM YouTube Channel – The Five Minute PM