

Small Resolutions

By Will Anderson

The New Year is here and New Year's Resolutions are in full effect. For most people, this means going to the gym and eating better, but for organizations, this usually manifests itself as a lot of activity around new initiatives to deliver the next "Big Thing". I imagine more than a couple of you are dealing with the side-effects of this phenomenon as I write this. The funny thing is that most of the "Big Things" in our career are actually quite a bit smaller (read: more manageable) and have more to say about where you'll end up in 15 years than the super-project on the horizon.

Very often when we think about projects, we tend to think of the large endeavors that are going to consume our lives for the next few years. For projects like these, having a good approach to project planning and system architecture are absolutely indispensable. It's the only way to truly tackle a project of that complexity with any real reliability and repeatability. However, most projects don't fall into this category. In fact, the vast majority of the project work you'll do in your career is going to consist of smaller assignments that are focused on more incremental goals. When it comes to your career, executing well on projects like these is vital and it could be argued that possessing a solid architecture and a realistic project design become even more important in such situations.

Most careers tend to progress in a gradual way; after each task, you may get assigned more complex duties and given greater responsibility. At each level, you succeed and move on to the next level or you fail and try again. At a certain level, failure is normal and even expected and can be absorbed quite easily into a career with little to no long-term effects. As the tasks themselves become more important, however, the organization's appetite for failure will begin to shift. What manifested itself as a 6 week delay on an 18 week project can quickly become 6 months on one that was supposed to last a year – if you're lucky. If a team has made a habit of missing on small deadlines, what confidence will leadership have in their ability to execute on larger initiatives?

The following are some general guidelines to managing smaller projects:

- **Eliminate as much formality as you can, but don't throw the baby out with the bathwater**
 - You must still have a solid architecture, task definitions, estimations, and a few project design options to present to your stakeholders.
 - You should still have a way to manage risky events, track changes to the project, and keep up with action items and issues. I usually use a very simple RAID (Risk, Action Item, Issues, Decision) log that has an integrated change control form as well.
 - Compress your tracking cycle. On a large project that spans a couple of years, it may be enough to track progress every 2 or 3 weeks. For projects that only last 4-6 months, consider tracking on a weekly basis to get insight more quickly into your project's behavior. Essentially, you are trying to cut short the cycle time of responding to changes and inflections.

- **Eliminate as many meetings as possible**

- Establish a single weekly meeting that is exactly one hour long that will focus on tactical concerns. Create an agenda for this meeting and stick to it.
- Establish a single monthly meeting that is exactly one hour long that will focus on strategic concerns. Create an agenda for this meeting and stick to it.
- If at all possible, any other meeting should be kept to an informal discussion between interested parties or part of a brief daily standup.
- If a more significant meeting is required as they sometimes are, create an agenda for the meeting and stick to it.
- Never schedule a single meeting to last for more than 2 hours. People lose interest. If you must have a long meeting, break it into two meetings.
- Meetings without agendas are productivity vampires. Kill them with fire.
- Formulate a meeting budget (such as 6 hours monthly) and manage it like any other budgetary item. Learn to prioritize and focus.

While this is by no means a comprehensive list, it does come from a place of practicality. I've made mistakes in this area in my career and have paid for it with sweat, blood, and tears. Once you become proficient in these areas, though, the time investment is very small and the return on investment is huge. It will start to act as a power multiplier, and productivity will emerge. What's more, this isn't bound to any particular execution methodology. You can use Agile techniques, spiral or waterfall techniques and still be in great shape. The important part here is that you are actively managing the work being done instead of just letting things happen and there is a world of difference between the two.

If you can do this on smaller projects, you can establish a reputation as a person that delivers. From there, it's a very small leap for management to ask you to help with larger endeavors where you simply add in the necessary structure required of your organization at that level. Doing these things will communicate something else to the leaders in your company. It will tell them that you are a professional who is serious about leading projects to successful delivery. In short, it will tell them that you are a trustworthy leader.

So, while your company works on its New Year's Resolutions, take one on for yourself: Quit sweating the big stuff and do the work necessary to establish yourself as more than just a head geek in your organization; conquer the small stuff and establish yourself as a leader.