

# Yoga for the PM of the Troubled Project

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Articles / Newsletter Article

**Date:** Sep 19, 2008 - 11:18 AM Myriads of causes can lead a project into trouble. But, for the Project Manager managing the troubled project, the first struggle in guiding the project out of trouble is to “see” clearly so that he/she can correctly diagnose the cause(s). As Pierre Wack, the management guru and French oil executive said, it is “about being in the right state of focus to put your finger unerringly on the key facts or insights that unlock or open understanding.”<sup>2</sup>

Wack employed this concept of combining the intellect with deep perception to foresee and plan for the future, thereby helping Shell anticipate two Arab-induced oil shocks in the 1970s and move from being the world’s eighth biggest oil company to being the second biggest in just two years<sup>2</sup>. Everyone has this capacity to “see” clearly. The challenge is unlocking that potential and removing the roadblocks preventing this insight. Stress is usually one of the biggest roadblocks people face in this quest to achieve the “the right state of focus.”<sup>2</sup> Such lofty goals are the last thing on the mind of a stressed-out PM wrestling with a troubled project: as you can imagine, getting through the daily basics and humdrum of meetings and reports is difficult enough when racked with stress.

The good news is numerous tools and techniques exist for managing stress and clearing the mind. Some people hit the gym; some turn up the music; others turn to junk food; Wack spent several weeks a year meditating in India with his guru. Certain techniques are more effective than others. The strength of Wack’s technique is that it goes beyond relieving stress to achieving a state of “centered-ness” of the mind.

As George Pitagorsky, noted author and project manager states, “Being centered allows a project manager to differentiate between the right time to take action and the right time to allow the process to unfold and resolve itself. The balance between activity and passive acceptance is critical to success in managing anything.” This brings us back to Wack’s technique: perhaps it isn’t as wacky as it was by the standards of his colleagues in his heyday. Today, yoga and meditation—an aspect of yoga—are commonly and increasingly regarded as effective techniques for managing stress and becoming centered.

For the project manager working to lead his/her project out of troubled territory, techniques for managing stress and being centered are just as crucial as the techniques outlined in the PMBOK<sup>®</sup> Guide. Still, such tools or techniques are only useful when they are regularly put to use: just as a Project Management Plan is a living document intended to be referenced throughout the life of the project, yoga and meditation are techniques to be employed on a daily basis throughout the PM’s life. While they are recommended and encouraged, the PM need not limit his/her already-harried day to attending formal yoga classes. “To limit meditation to formal sessions is a mistake,” says Pitagorsky. Yoga and meditation are accessible throughout the PM’s day in any length of time—whether stuck at a traffic light or a long meeting. Let us explore how the PM of a troubled project can

leverage yoga to manage stress and find his/her “center”, thereby finding the “the right state of focus<sup>2</sup>”, the “confidence in our ability to read and acknowledge the current situation<sup>4</sup>” and “strategic insights beyond the mind’s reach<sup>2</sup>” needed to skillfully maneuver the troubled project.

First, let us start with the basics because foundational concepts in yoga—and project Management—are very important. Too often, both in PM and yoga, we often forget the basic, simple things that are actually the most crucial for our success and happiness. In yoga the most basic and important concept is the breath. Your breath directly corresponds to the state of your mind and body. Therefore, the key is to use deep breathing to relax the mind and body, making you more productive. So, the next time a particular meeting, troublesome email or unbearable traffic fills you with tension, just notice your breath and then take a few deep breaths (letting your stomach and ribs expand as much as possible comfortably as you inhale, and squeezing the air out of your stomach comfortably before taking another deep inhalation) to instantly relax your mind, allowing you to tackle the situation at hand with a calm, clear mind. Then, as you resume reading your email or inching up in traffic, keep your breathing slow and deep.

In Project Management, people, resources, and time are interconnected and must come together for project success. Similarly, in yoga the mind, body and spirit are all interconnected and the health of each needs to be maintained for the health and success of the individual. As we get caught up in our work, we get caught up in our minds and forget our bodies. Only when the body, mind and spirit are healthy, balanced and connected will the troubled Project Manager be able to approach his/her project with full creativity and potential. So every hour, make it a habit to get up from your desk and take a few minutes’ break for some simple stretches and deep breathing. Or, if you are leading an unproductive meeting and really want to change your perspective, just do a few simple stretches from your chair. Often the most effective answers are the most simple!

Likewise, these *asanas, or poses*, provided within this article, appear simple and yet their effect on easing your stress and focusing your mind will do wonders for helping you turn your troubled project around! You can start with a few of the poses offered at the end of this article or with something you may have learned at a formal yoga session; as you become more familiar with the poses, you may find certain poses to be more satisfying or appropriate for certain situations or stressors. Take a phased approach if you are new to yoga: practice one or two new poses each month, adding to your repertoire as your familiarity increases. Never force the breath or breathe through the mouth. At the slightest sign of discomfort, reduce the duration of inhalation and exhalation, and if necessary, discontinue the practice. Do not practice after a meal.

The key is to practice these *asana* and breathing exercises in a disciplined manner for some time such that it becomes an integral part of your daily activities. It has to become automatic for you to be your best and achieve your best on those days when nearly every project on your plate seems to be headed for trouble.

Another basic concept in yoga is awareness. For example, when driving to work, rather

than stressing about the many things already going wrong with the project and the email you have to send out first thing, this is the best time to step back and see the project as a whole, the scope of work and resources, its initial goals and the reasons you were first eager to begin. If you “meditate” thus, you will carry this perspective with you unconsciously throughout the day, giving you a greater awareness and clarity of the project while you work on all the gritty details. When working in this manner, you will soon find that you better understand where/how to focus your time when everything seems to be in chaos.

With a steady practice of yoga, including *asana*, breathing exercises, philosophy and meditation, you will start to experience this ability to “see” the situation at hand and the future of the project more clearly, allowing you to effectively find success—however that may be defined—when managing a troubled project.

Suggested Asanas or poses:

(1) *Tadasana* or the reach-for-the-ceiling pose

Stand with your feet together and your arms by your sides. Interlock your fingers, turn the palms out and--on an inhale--come up on your tiptoes as you stretch your arms, shoulders, and chest upwards. Feel the stretch from your fingertips to your toes. You can do the same using only the upper body while you're still sitting in the desk during a meeting or on those extremely tight days! To help maintain balance if standing, pick a point in front of you to focus on throughout the pose. Hold your breath there for a few seconds, then breathe out and lower your hands. Repeat this three times slowly and with awareness of the stretch and your breath. If it is very easy, you can do it with your eyes closed. This simple exercise stretches your entire spine, abdominal muscles and intestines and develops physical and mental balance.

(2) *Kati chakrasana* or the twist

Stand with your feet about a foot and a half apart; and your arms by your sides. Take a deep breath while raising the arms to shoulder level; your arms are parallel to the ground and out to the side. Breathe out and twist the body to the left. Bring the right hand to the left shoulder and wrap the left arm around the back and look over your left shoulder. Hold the breath comfortably for a few seconds. Try to deepen the twist of the spine and stretch of the abdomen. Inhale. Come back to the starting position and repeat the same on the right side. Repeat three times each on both sides -- slowly and with awareness of the stretch and your breath. This asana tones the waist, back and hips and relieves stiffness in the back from prolonged sitting. If you're short on time, try doing it more dynamically by twisting side to side as you swing your arms rhythmically.

### (3) *Anuloma Viloma* or the calm-me-down breath

Sit in a comfortable position with your head and back straight. Rest your left hand on the left knee. Fold down your middle finger, forefinger and pinky finger of your right hand. Then, bring your right hand in front of your face. The thumb should be right above the right nostril and the ring finger above your left nostril. You will use the thumb and ring finger to alternately press on one nostril to block the flow of breath. Close the right nostril with the thumb and breathe in deeply through the left nostril. Mentally count the number of seconds, "Om 1, Om 2, Om 3" until the inhalation ends comfortably. Do not strain. Now, close the left nostril with the ring finger; release the pressure of the thumb on the right nostril. While breathing out through the right nostril count "Om 1, Om 2, Om 3". Try to keep the inhalation and exhalation time count equal. Next, inhale through the right nostril, keeping the same count in the same manner. At the end of inhalation, close the right nostril, open the left nostril and exhale through the left nostril. Count as before. This is one round. Practice 10 rounds. Breathing exercises are best performed with the guidance of a professional yoga teacher. With this breathing exercise, the whole body is infused with an extra supply of oxygen and the two sides of the brain become balanced.

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