



Five Rules for Project Success

Based on the Children's World Cup Soccer Rules

This article was originally published in 2010 after the FIFA World Cup in South Africa. These rules for successful projects, based on Kids' Rules of World Cup Soccer, apply equally today.

I am not a big sports fan. My husband is an avid fan of baseball and American football, but I usually go about my business despite the frequent exclamations of euphoria and despair that reverberate throughout the house during sporting events. But a recent visit with our grandsons raised my interest in one sport—soccer (football).

Having recently played World Cup soccer with four grandsons aged 8-2, where the rules were emphatically if inconsistently enforced, I thought about how these children's rules apply to projects. Given my lack of knowledge about the real World Cup rules, I don't have the slightest inkling of whether these kids' rules even come close to reality, but they seem to work.

So, at the risk of overusing the myriad analogies relating to children's play to projects, here are five Kids' World Cup Rules for successful projects.

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Five Rules for Project Success *(cont.)*

Rule #1: Define the goal and how to reach it.

In our kids' game the goal kept changing. That is, how a goal was achieved was fluid. If the ball was kicked inbounds but bounced off the pole it probably didn't count as a goal. Sometimes a goal could be scored by kicking the ball under the table, sometimes by missing the table entirely.

On our projects not only do we need to have clear, unchanging business and project objectives, but we need a clear plan for how to get there. If either the goal or the set of project management and business analysis processes vary too much, the players will be confused, frustrated, and ultimately unsuccessful.

Rule #2: Focusing too much on the goal at the expense of your opponent can get you a yellow card, which is like a strike in baseball.

Three of them and you're out, according to the Kids' Rules. The grandsons loved marching around the field silently carrying a small yellow block when an infraction had occurred. In soccer we need to get the ball from our opponent in order to make a goal, but not by infringing on others.

Many project managers focus on meeting the project objectives without paying enough attention to our "opponents," those who are not supportive of the project. Perhaps the project goals and objectives are at odds with their own, perhaps they are uncomfortable with our project processes or they don't like the sponsor or other stakeholders, perhaps the end result of the project means that they that they will have to learn new processes, no longer be experts, have to learn how to use new systems or products, or perhaps even lose their jobs.

There are lots of reasons why some stakeholders may not want to support the project. However, it is vital to recognize the stakeholders who are our opponents and develop strategies to bring them on board.

Rule #3: The red card-means you've really messed up and you're expelled from the game.

Fortunately our grandsons were not cutthroat and red cards were not abundant. On projects, expulsion can happen when trust has been broken. Sometimes we don't even know that we've been expelled. But if we feel like a pariah, or if a lot of communication is going on behind our backs, or if our team seems less motivated, if subject matter experts (SMEs) start showing up late or missing meetings, we may have gotten that red card and might have been expelled.

Rule #4: When we mess up unintentionally we might get a green card.

A green card means a minor offense has been committed, but the play can proceed. In Kids' Rules it means an unintentional offense. As grandparents and as project professionals we're going to mess up, but if it's unintentional, we will probably be forgiven.

As a grandparent I usually got a green card for using my hands by mistake. However, when I used my hands several times in a row even though I didn't mean to, patience wore thin, I was told "that's not how you play the game," and I was given a yellow card.

On projects there will be times when we mess up, but as long as it's unintentional and infrequent people will understand. But when we mess up the same way with the same stakeholders over and over, we are viewed as incompetent -- a definite trust buster.

Rule #5: Don't argue with the referee.

You could end up with a red card. The referee is the referee. My grandsons were proud of Team USA who despite the bad call acted professionally and were good sports.

Five Rules for Project Success *(cont.)*

On our projects the sponsor is the referee. We will probably disagree with our sponsor from time to time, but as we know the sponsor (referee) isn't always right, but the sponsor is always the sponsor.

There are several other rules that apply, like what happens when we don't have a referee (neutral facilitator) or when we don't devote our entire attention to the game, but we'll end here, wishing you fun with family and success with your projects.

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