



Gary M Nelson, PMP

Gary is passionate about sharing knowledge and making Project Management concepts more accessible, particularly to new and aspiring Project Managers (of all ages). Said another way, he likes to tell stories to help convey complex concepts in a way that helps the concepts "stick". Who says learning shouldn't be fun?

Gary is an IT Project Manager who has worked in the Telecom, Student Information Systems and Local Government sectors since graduating from Simon Fraser University (BC, Canada) in 1989. His international experience includes projects in New Zealand,

Taiwan, Hong Kong, the US and Canada.

Gary is the author of three project management books, and has served as a Board member for the PMI West Coast B.C. Chapter and for the PMI New Zealand Chapter. He is currently the Northern Branch Chair for the PMI New Zealand Chapter (2014-2015).

Sample Interview Questions & Answers

How did you first get into project management?

I have been working on projects my entire career, since I started in the Telecom space back in 1989. Similar to many project managers, I did not originally set out to become one. My first manager actually tricked me into it! He started me doing Microsoft Project schedules for the software releases and it gradually progressed from there, supporting the project manager and then taking on my own projects.

Once I had been managing projects of different sizes for a while, my manager encouraged me to go for some training and to get my PMP, which I completed in 2000. Since then I have done a variety of other projects, ranging from multi-year/multi-million dollar ones to hundreds of smaller concurrent projects. I have learned something new with each type of project.

What are your favorite project management books and why?

I have read a number of Project Management books over the years - many of the "pure PM" ones are more textbook-like, so they are useful for facts and principles but not necessarily engaging. On the other hand, Project Management is actually a broad discipline so I find there are many books that I consider helpful in managing my projects.

One of my favourite "PM" books is The Lazy Project Manager by **Peter Taylor** - he does an excellent job of communicating a number of essential principles in an engaging and humorous way.

In the category of Leadership - I enjoy many of **John C Maxwell's** books, particularly Developing the Leader Within You. I find that I re-read (or listen, as I also have them on audiobook) to help refresh my thinking about leadership, particularly when I prepare for a new project.

What was your first experience with public speaking?

When I was in high school, I was quite introverted and frankly, I was terrified of public speaking. However, I figured I would have to do it when I was older and working...so I deliberately pushed myself into doing it. I entered a public speaking competition with students from half a dozen other schools. With a small handful of cue cards and no prior experience, I did a short speech on the topic of *Breeder Reactors*...and won first place in my category!

Yes, I was a nerd - but the category was humour, and I was discussing *mating habits* and *social patterns*. The look on the judges' faces was priceless when they actually started listening. One even dropped his pen, and didn't pick it up until I had finished.

Encouraged by the experience, I entered a school speaking contest the following spring - and I placed second behind a good case for Euthanasia (the topic, not the other student).

Ever since then, I have looked for opportunities to speak in public - especially when it felt uncomfortable. It can still be an effort to push myself out of my comfort zone at times, but the rewards are definitely worth it.

You have been volunteering in different capacities for many years. What advice do you have on volunteering?

I highly recommend becoming a volunteer with something you care about or feel strongly about. It is very rewarding, and it gives you the opportunity to do and try many things that you may not be able to do at home or during your "day job". The skills you learn through volunteering can also help your career advancement as well, but that is more of a side effect than a reason to volunteer.

I was involved with Scouting for many years, coming up through the sections and finally becoming a leader when I was a young adult. It was immensely rewarding, and I got a lot more out of it than I put in - but I put in a lot of effort, because I enjoyed it so much. Many of my leadership development opportunities were through Scouting, both training and the opportunity to practice it every week.

Be careful when you open your mouth, you might just be volunteering for something.

Later, I got involved as a volunteer with PMI through a complaint I made at my first chapter meeting. I made the mistake of complaining that the website was out of date, as it was hard to find out about the meeting. As it happened, I was complaining to the Chapter President, and she said "have I got a role for you!"

The next week, I became the VP of Communications. It was a wonderful experience lasting several years. Later, I became involved in volunteering with the PMI chapter when I moved to New Zealand - it is a great way to give back to the profession, while also getting to know your peers in a new country.

You use stories throughout 'Gazza's Guide to Practical Project Management' to explain project management principles. What is your favorite project management story?

I have favourites across several areas. If you are talking about building teams, I would say it would have to be the "Russian Sushi Incident" in the chapter "**People, we're talking about People!**". Take the time to get to know your team - and their food preferences!

If you are talking about Risk, then I would say the Umbrella chapter - "Everything I Need to Know about Risk Management I learned from my Pocket Umbrella." There were a lot of painful truths in that one - and useful lessons to be learned.

Although many people quite like the **Ice Cream** chapter too - that one is focused on developing excellent requirements.

If you could offer once piece of advice to new project managers, what would it be?

Keep things simple. Inside every complex problem there is a set of simpler ones trying to get out. Things can get too complicated very easily - and it is then hard to fit all that detail into your head. So when you are faced with a challenge - look at it from several angles to see if it can be simplified and get to the root of it - the lowest common denominator.

Of course there is a limit - don't try to over-simplify things to the nth degree, but get them to a level where you understand things clearly - and can also communicate at that level to others on your team. It's all about effective communication, in the end.

What was your inspiration behind writing Gazza's Guide to Project Management?

I had done a lot of writing in my career - training materials and product manuals as well as all of the normal project stuff, but what I particularly enjoyed was training. The courses were primarily on technical topics, and I wrote most of the materials. As you can imagine, it could be quite easy to have a very dry course when you are talking about database tables and business logic for several weeks. However, as I delivered the training I found I was telling stories to help drive some points home, or if people started to wander. They were anecdotes, really, from other client systems and situations, to help put the topic in context.

Not only was it very successful in getting their attention, they learned a lot from the courses and I was surprised to have many feedback forms say the course was the best training they had ever had...!

Ever since, I have looked for opportunities to use anecdotes or applicable stories to help deliver the message when training, or when mentoring other project managers.

In 2011 I started blogging for the first time, first with a technical series on developing custom project tracking systems using Sharepoint. As we rolled into 2012, I decided to start sharing my project experiences through my blog - following the same principle I found so successful in classroom training. That is, to include anecdotes and metaphors in the topic or lesson - in short, as stories.

In April 2012, I looked at the topics I had written in my blog so far and realized I had the beginning of a decent book - with each lesson as a chapter. They each stood well on their own - but they were becoming a series of lessons structured around the typical project phases. They also covered many of the core knowledge areas, with most of them delivered in the form of stories and anecdotes.

There were already several books with the plain title "Practical Project Management" - but I wanted to convey the sense that Project Management is a *Journey* for all of us, because that is what it really is. We are all practicing Project Managers, constantly working to improve - just like doctors in a "Practice". The other aspect of "Gazza's Guide" that I intended to show is that there is always help available along the journey - from your mentors, colleagues, and other people you work with.

Throughout the book, I share my personal experiences in helping to make some typically complex topics more accessible and understandable, so I guess it is partly auto-biographical as well. Of course, the chapters are not all in exhaustive depth (there are many good PM books that are devoted to what I cover in a single chapter). However, I find that if you are bogged down or daunted by an imposing new knowledge area, if you can get a firm foothold then suddenly the rest of it starts to make a lot more sense.

In your blog, you speak about leadership experiences based in your time in the Scouting movement. How have you adapted those lessons to your current working approach?

Well, you are the culmination of everything you have ever done and what has happened to you. There were a few main things I learned about leadership from Scouting:

What I learned as a youth was the confidence to try new things and persist until you succeed. You also have plenty of opportunity to do problem solving, and working together in small groups. Not all of the groups worked together well, but some did – at that stage it was probably just trying to figure out what worked and what didn't.

As I progressed into the older sections and began volunteering as a leader, there was a lot of emphasis on developing youth to be the future leaders and skills around working together as an adult leadership team. It was a pronounced shift from a childhood "me" concept to what you can do to help others – to the rest of your leadership team and what you need to do to promote the growth of others. A few of the key takeaways I have from that is the importance of delegation – and developing trust and respect within your leadership team.

However, the most profound lesson I learned was the importance of *leading by stepping back* – knowing when it is time to put the new leader in charge (even though they may be a lot younger), and to be there to support and mentor them. The most important thing we can do as leaders is to develop new leaders.

You have a highly analytical background that deals with business management. How did you make the jump from the business field to the more creative side of writing fiction?

Well, I have enjoyed writing ever since I was a teenager. Up through University and my early career I did a lot of creative writing, mainly poetry and a few short stories. In my work career, the writing has perhaps not been as "creative", but when developing and delivering training courses I looked for ways to make the material more relevant and accessible to the participants. This included telling anecdotes (stories) during training sessions supported the delivery. Response from the participants was very good; it seems no matter how old or young you are, everyone likes a good story, whether it is fiction or an experience-based anecdote.

The jump from business to fiction was not as big a leap as I thought it might be - particularly as [The Ultimate Tree House Project](#) is a series of core lessons woven into a fun, full-length children's story. So I guess you might call it "instructional fiction".

Prior to writing your children's books did you do any other fiction writing?

I did a lot of writing in my early years - and then took a long break from poetry or fiction. I always wanted to write a book - but the problem was that when I was a teenager, I was not sure what would be interesting enough to write a book about. I started writing some sci-fi stories back in university but I didn't have the confidence or skill at the time to carry it through.

Did you do an outline first?

Absolutely. I find that this works extremely well for any type of writing - work or personal. When you have the basic outline flushed out - headings, some details, filling in the rest of the detail comes relatively easily.

How do you write?

In terms of the actual writing, I tend to internally verbalize the words as I write - I find this to be the same both for work and personal writing. I think this helps with the flow and grammar - if something does not seem quite right when I am typing it, I will repeat the sentence or paragraph aloud and rework it in my head until it flows. I write mostly at night, when the kids are in bed and it is quiet - but when inspired I can write at any time of day depending what else is going on.

What is the best advice you've been given about writing or that you've learned that you would like to pass along?

1. Read, read, read. If you want to write well - read a lot of different authors in a variety of genres. I read mostly sci-fi and fantasy through my childhood and early adult years - but I have expanded into other genre since then, and I think that has helped me a lot with rounding out my writing.
2. Don't let people tell you what to write or how to write it. Let them review it, edit it and make corrections after you have written it - but it is your story. Write it the way you feel you need to. Of course, you might write some horrible stuff along the way and never get it published - but your writing is part of you. If you let someone else tell you what to write - it is not really yours anymore. Do, however, be open and listen to your editors when they suggest constructive changes.
3. Write about things you are passionate about. I love to teach people and share lessons through stories; and this has been reflected in my books, as well as my blog and podcast.

4. Have fun. Both books have been very fun for me to write; I probably would have stopped writing them if I was not having fun doing it.

5. If you plan to self-publish, write a good, well-written piece of work, and have it edited and thoroughly proofread. There is a lot of junk out there - make sure yours is not one of them.