



IT mentor **RALPH SACCO** says project managers can learn a lot from the witticisms attributed to Yogi Berra.

GIORGIO PALMISANO

# Yogi Berra, PMP

When a project has you stumped, just think: **“What would Yogi do?”**  
By Ralph Sacco

**I**F BASEBALL and project management have one thing in common, it's the direct relationship between teamwork and success. Yogi Berra, a baseball legend with a unique approach to management and life, is a particular favorite of mine, so I recently asked myself, “What if Yogi were a project manager?”

As I thought about it, I realized that Yogi has a lot to say about my line of work. Many of the most famous quotes that have been attributed to him seem to bear directly on the art and science of project management.

## PLANNING

**“You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there.”**

Have you ever managed a project for which the premise was faulty? If this issue is not resolved during project initiation, you have a major-league problem. It's like when the umpire expects your pitcher to hit a tiny strike zone. Executing to a faulty premise is unpleasant at best and debilitating at worst. Your team can't get traction, and morale inevitably suffers. If the client (or your management) sets unreasonable standards, you have to get out of the dugout and argue balls and strikes. But you need to get your facts straight and communicate with the decision-makers in no uncertain terms.

## COMMUNICATING

**“I didn't really say everything I said.”** Miscommunication: the gift that keeps on giving. How many times have you held a project meeting and been surprised that it wasn't the “check the box” event you expected? Yogi knew what he was talking about: What I think I say and what you think you hear can be two different things. Who's on first?

## DECISION-MAKING

**“If you come to a fork in the road, take it.”** Foster a culture of decisiveness and clear execution. I can't think of one thing better for morale, credibility and project effectiveness. This doesn't mean making arbitrary decisions or carving plans in stone. It means putting in the effort with manage-

### THE VIEW FROM BEHIND THE PLATE

**WHEN YOGI BERRA** was managing the New York Yankees, the parallels between his job and that of a project manager were obvious. But I like to think that his earlier position – as a 15-time all-star and three-time MVP catcher – also has a lot in common with mine. Think about what a great catcher like Berra does:

- Positions himself between the team and the power figure (umpire/customer).
- Stands up for the team when there's a bad call.
- Faces his team (literally) and watches them execute throughout the game.

- Mostly plays defense.
- Guides the pitcher but lets him call the shots.
- Provides coaching when needed (mound visits are management by walking around).
- Greatly influences the tempo of the game.
- Communicates with opposing forces to keep them in check (rattles the batters).
- Stays out of the way and is often the backbone of the team but gets little glory.

– RALPH SACCO

ment and team members to make well-thought-out decisions that naturally stand the test of time. And it means weighing the trade-offs in terms of cost, prestige and momentum when facing the possibility of changing decisions that have already been made.

## MEASURING PROGRESS

**“You'd better cut the pizza in four pieces, because I'm not hungry enough to eat six.”** Earned value (once calibrated, simulated and adopted) is a

## IT MENTOR

very good barometer for justifying course corrections — if you stick with it. But I have been on projects where the management team has tossed out the measures when the news was trending bad. You can slice and reslice the numbers, but it's the same pizza. In the end, you'll still get indigestion.

## EXECUTING

**“Think? How the hell are you gonna think and hit at the same time?”** Yogi clearly understands the distinction between planning and execution, and so should you. Once the plan is in place, get out of your team's face and let them do the voodoo that they do so well. I find that during the execution phase, the best approach for me is low-touch — unless things are going very wrong. Try not to tweak things to death. How can your team keep their eyes on the ball if you're constantly yelling instructions from the dugout?

## MANAGING

**“You can observe a lot just by watching.”** Remember management by walking around, or

MBWA? There's no better way to get that all-important gut check on project stats. But remember, there's a difference between chatting it up with the guys in the dugout and second-guessing every fastball.

## MEETING DEADLINES

**“I knew I was going to take the wrong train, so I left early.”**

Have you ever been on a project where no tasks were completed late? Me, neither. It's a fact that some tasks are going to be late. But there's something you can do about it. While not appropriate for every project, one option is to make it a “project theme” to be early whenever you can. For example, you can authorize some overtime for key tasks from the start. Build up a lead from the get-go even though you aren't behind (yet). This way, you can move things along and reduce your overall risk, especially when you get on the wrong train later on.

## CLOSEOUT

**“This is like déjà vu all over again.”** We perform the “lessons learned” project phase for a reason. Yet how many times have we gotten deep into the next build phase only to realize there are still loose ends — just like the last time? If we don't apply the lessons learned, did we really learn them?

You've heard the saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. When you watch the game films, pay attention. ▶

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