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Keep Calm: Lessons Learned from delivering complex projects in ambiguity and chaos
Second Edition
by Tonica Griffin

Keep Calm: Lessons Learned from delivering complex projects in ambiguity and chaos [1, 2]

A neurodivergent perspective on navigating the challenges of delivering critical or complex projects under demanding and arduous conditions

Tonica Griffin

Abstract

Imagine you have been assigned to a highly visible, mission critical project - the kind of project that, if successful, can solidify your reputation as a trusted leader within your organization. Sounds great, right? What if I also told you that the requirements are still evolving, the budget is not yet confirmed, and the given timeline is one-half to one-third the amount of time required to comfortably deliver the expected results. Although not ideal, this is a scenario that happens more often than we would like to think.

In this particular case, the charge was to onboard a newly acquired company into the acquiring organization's enterprise technical stack. The new company had to retain its current operations without degradation of performance. No communication could be made with the new company until the deal had officially closed. Once the deal closed, it was revealed that the project team had ninety days to transition company operations and meet "Day One" ready expectations. But the key stakeholders had conflicting visions and strategies on how to integrate the new company. As the project manager, where do you start? How do you manage opposing expectations of anxious stakeholders? How do you set yourself and your project team up for success? And what does viewing the situation from a neurodivergent lens have to do with any of this?

This paper, based on an actual project, will provide insight into how an offbeat perspective on project delivery can bring order and structure, while setting the stage for success when dealing with such described ambiguous circumstances.

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[1] Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 17th Project Management Symposium at the University of Texas at Dallas in May 2025. It is republished here with permission of the author and conference organizers.

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Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of project management, practitioners often find themselves at the intersection of opportunity and adversity, tasked with delivering results under less-than-ideal circumstances. Few challenges are as daunting as those posed by high-stakes, mission-critical projects. This paper leverages an example of a particularly intricate scenario: the integration of a newly acquired organization into an established enterprise technical infrastructure. Imagine navigating a project where the requirements are fluid, the budget remains uncertain, and the timeline is drastically compressed to a mere ninety days to enable seamless operational continuity. With communication constrained until the deal's closure and conflicting visions from key stakeholders, the path to success is fraught with complexity.

Let us explore the actionable insights derived from this real-world project, highlighting how an unconventional perspective—particularly one that embraces neurodiversity—can provide clarity amidst chaos. By examining innovative strategies for stakeholder management and project execution, this white paper aims to equip project leaders with the tools necessary to turn potential pitfalls into stepping stones for success. Join me as we uncover the methodologies that can transform ambiguity into structured outcomes, ultimately strengthening our roles as trusted leaders in our organizations.

Ambiguous Projects

Before diving into lessons learned, it is important to understand what makes these types of projects so uniquely challenging. Complex, ambiguous projects, like the integration of a newly acquired company, are notoriously difficult to manage because they literally defy many of the foundational principles of traditional project management. Project managers must operate under shifting priorities, evolving requirements, and conflicting stakeholder expectations.

Adding Chaos to Ambiguity

In attempt to bring order to the chaos, project managers are at risk of further intensifying the tension that accompanies such projects by responding in the following ways:

- Over-structuring (False Certainty) - imposing rigid frameworks or detailed plans too early, which can easily fall apart as project realities shift.

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- Avoidance or delay - avoiding meaningful action due to waiting for "perfect" clarity that never arrives.

- Frequent Escalation - ambiguity often leads to repeated escalations to leadership for clarity and decisions.

- Micromanagement - attempting to regain control by unintentionally overmanaging, causing frustration and reduced morale.

- Reactive Firefighting - jumping from issue to issue, always reacting to the point that proactive planning and leading are significantly minimized.

- Informal Workarounds - working outside the project structure to get things done, which can introduce discrepancies in quality, inconsistent messaging, and duplicated efforts.

Linear Thinking

It may seem logical to default to a linear, structured approach when faced with a high-stakes project: set priorities, build a detailed plan, communicate frequently and clearly, and ensure all stakeholders are aligned through regular updates. While these tactics are effective in more structured projects, they may not be sufficient for more complex ones. The traditional approach might overlook perspectives that could offer innovative solutions and creative problem-solving strategies that challenge conventional thinking. Ambiguity demands more than disciplined execution; it requires the ability to navigate uncertainty, make decisions with incomplete information, and continuously adapt. Success often hinges on perspective from many different angles, identifying underlying patterns, and responding creatively to unforeseen challenges.

A Divergent Perspective

About 20% of the US adult population is neurodivergent (CDC 2024). Neurodivergent is a term used to describe individuals whose brain functions, processes, or behaves differently from what is considered typical or "neurotypical." Neurodivergent is often used to refer to people with conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, and more. It is important to note the term indicates "different," not "deficit." Instead, it highlights variations in brain behavior as a natural, valid form of human diversity rather than disorders that need to be fixed.

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For the purpose of this paper, most of the discussion around neurodivergence will reference ADHD. According to the CDC, the US adult population with ADHD is estimated at 6% or approximately 15.5 million (CDC 2024). Types of ADHD include Inattentive, Hyperactive-impulsive, and Combined (most common) and commonly cause difficulties with focusing or completing tasks, impulsivity or restlessness, and emotional dysregulation. However, despite the challenges and negative connotations that come with having ADHD, about 67% of adults diagnosed with ADHD are employed full time. And contrary to the emphasis on the negative that is often discussed with ADHD and employment, neurodivergence can have a surprisingly positive impact in the workplace.

ADHD Strengths in Ambiguity

Individuals with ADHD are known for specific strengths that, when understood and leveraged properly, can easily convert into valuable professional assets, especially in nebulous scenarios. Such "ADHD" strengths include:

- High energy and enthusiasm - beneficial for energizing teams, tackling urgent tasks with vigor, and motivating others.

- Creative and idea generation - a skill that excels in bringing fresh ideas, brainstorming, and innovative problem-solving.

- Hyperfocus (on passions) - invaluable for delivering high-quality output, even under extreme pressure or tight deadlines.

- Adaptability - champions the art of being flexible under changing circumstances, a trait that thrives in fast-paced, evolving environments.

- Risk-Tasking and initiative - willingness to try new approaches.

- Empathy and sensitivity - promotes strong interpersonal connection and drives understanding of different perspectives.

- Spontaneity - drives quick response to shifting demands or new crises.

- Big Picture Thinking - helps drive strategic vision, innovation, and change management.

These strengths and traits are the foundation of what allows individuals, in this case - project managers, to tackle highly visible, and often high risk projects with a healthy dose of tenacity. To better understand, here is a closer look at how these strengths translate in high stakes projects.

Thriving Under Pressure

Individuals with ADHD often perform best under tight deadlines and heightened urgency. This "deadline-driven focus" can help them rapidly triage, adapt, and deliver under pressure when it matters most. Urgency can activate the brain's reward and arousal systems, causing a surge in dopamine which can transform a task from "boring" to "abstract." This surge temporarily balances the neurotransmitter deficit found in brains with ADHD, allowing focus to "lock in." Tight deadlines create external pressure and adrenaline, which heightens mental engagement. The brain shifts from scanning multiple inputs to tunnel vision on one task; this is hyperfocus. Hyperfocus paired with high energy compels the ADHD individual to rise to the challenge with enthusiasm.

Big Picture Thinking

Big-picture thinking and pattern recognition come naturally, helping the ADHD project manager to look past the ambiguity and instead focus on "what's really needed," even when details are vague. The ADHD brain is often coined as "attention deficit," but it may be more accurate to say it is a condition of "interest-based attention." ADHD minds are naturally nonlinear, allowing one to jump between ideas, concepts, and possibilities. While many people with ADHD struggle with sustained attention to minutiae, they often excel at seeing how pieces fit into a larger system.

This allows the ADHD project manager to connect disparate information, seeing patterns that others may miss. The dynamic of these components combined together is particularly useful for recognizing dependencies, anticipating risks, and synthesizing diverse stakeholder needs.

Managing Stakeholders

Two well-known and well supported ADHD advantages are intuitive empathy and fast processing. Both enable the ADHD mind to read emotional cues and shift perspectives quickly - a valuable skill for stakeholder diplomacy. Rapid emotional scanning is effective at looking beyond stakeholder comments by quickly sensing tone, mood, and intent. Fast cognitive processing allows the ADHD project manager to absorb and compare multiple viewpoints and identify "hidden" common ground between conflicting inputs. In addition, the ADHD mind is often a naturally relational thinker, remembering what matters to people, what motivates them, and how to speak their language. This skill helps the ADHD project manager position

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solutions in ways that make each stakeholder input "feel heard," even when the request cannot be fully met.

Prioritizing Work

For individuals with ADHD, keeping tasks prioritized and organized is a persistent challenge. The ADHD brain struggles with executive functions like planning, sequencing, and time management. Even when motivation is high, the ability to initiate or complete tasks in a structured way can lag behind. This can lead to missed deadlines, forgotten details, and a sense of constant catch-up. All items that are critical to project management. However, many ADHD individuals develop powerful compensatory strategies using tools and systems to bridge the gap. Visual planners, color-coded calendars, digital task managers (like Jira, Asana, or Monday.com), and time-blocking techniques can all support effective prioritization and organization. These tools externalize memory and planning, reducing cognitive load and helping the ADHD mind to maintain focus. Some also rely on delegating tasks that play to their weaknesses to others in order to focus on tasks that they do best. The ADHD project manager may break tasks into smaller, more manageable actions to make organization and prioritization easier to manage.

Lessons Learned

Now that we have a thorough understanding of the complexities that come with ambiguous projects, neurodivergence, and the strengths of the ADHD project manager, let us revisit our project and share some lessons learned from the experience of a neurodivergent (ADHD) project manager.

1. Channel ADHD-Driven Urgency into Momentum

Rather than being paralyzed by urgency, use it as fuel to create momentum and energize teams.

Why it works: ADHD brains thrive under pressure—tight timelines activate urgency, focus, and high energy. In this project, a 90-day window forced immediate action, but instead of freezing, the ADHD project manager and team leaned into the pressure. That energy sparked progress, enabling the team to effectively triage, adapt, and move quickly. Urgency became an asset, pushing through ambiguity and inertia to achieve Day One readiness. When wielded skillfully,

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this urgency doesn't cause stress—it accelerates clarity and commitment.

2. Use ADHD Intuition to Align Stakeholders

Leverage empathy and relational thinking to find common ground and integrate diverse perspectives quickly, fostering trust and alignment.

Why it works: The project began with conflicting executive visions, but underneath those surface-level differences was a shared desired outcome: operational readiness on Day One. Using empathy and ADHD strengths like fast emotional scanning and pattern recognition, the project manager was able to read between the lines to identify that common ground. That insight became the anchor for all decisions, aligning stakeholder expectations. In ambiguous projects, this ability to synthesize disparate inputs and intuitively find what truly matters helps neutralize chaos and build alignment.

3. Lead with Authentic Energy and Charisma

Use authentic enthusiasm and natural charisma to inspire teams, especially in chaotic environments.

Why it works: ADHD project managers often exude enthusiasm that becomes contagious. In this case, the compressed timeline and unfamiliar systems could have overwhelmed the team. But the project manager's passion and energy helped motivate experienced team members to engage quickly and adapt fluidly. When clarity is rare, authentic leadership becomes the morale anchor that keeps the team focused and inspired even when stress levels are high. The right energy can make the difference between burnout and breakthrough.

4. Use Tools to Turn Challenges into Strengths

Leverage external systems and digital tools to support organization, task tracking, and other weaknesses.

Why it works: ADHD often challenges working memory and sustained attention, especially in complex environments. But the project manager turned this into a strength by offloading task tracking and detail management to systems like Jira and modular plans. This allowed for clear prioritization and real-time adaptation, an approach that kept progress on track even as

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information evolved. Modular thinking supported execution on known tasks, while leaving space for adjusting unknowns without collapsing the overall plan.

Keep Calm

When everything else feels uncertain—requirements, timelines, stakeholder input—a calm project manager signals stability, control, and confidence, even if the path forward isn't fully clear. Calmness is not passive; it is active leadership. It creates emotional safety, helping teams think clearly, make rational decisions under pressure, and maintain focus. In times of ambiguity and stress, a calm presence becomes the anchor that protects morale, builds trust, and enables forward momentum. Innovation doesn't thrive in chaos — It thrives in psychological stability.

This real-world experience is a powerful example of how neurodivergence, in this case ADHD, can be a strategic advantage in high-pressure, ambiguous environments. It demonstrates that leadership doesn't require full certainty to begin; momentum can come from action rather than exhaustive planning. Structure can be dynamic, personal, and adaptive. Emotional intelligence is not a bonus — it's essential. Good questions often outperform quick answers. And most importantly, complex projects benefit from cognitive diversity, not just conformity to best practices.

In the end, the neurodivergent project manager reminds us that success doesn't always follow a linear path. Sometimes, it's the unconventional thinker who calmly leads teams through chaos, transforms uncertainty into progress, and humanizes the journey along the way.

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Tonica Griffin, PMP is a results-driven program and project management leader with approximately two decades of experience across technology, financial services, education, and other corporate environments. Currently serving as AVP of Technology Engagement, at Revantage, a Blackstone Company, she excels in aligning strategic initiatives with business goals, driving technology modernization and digital transformation, and leading high-impact cross-functional projects.

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