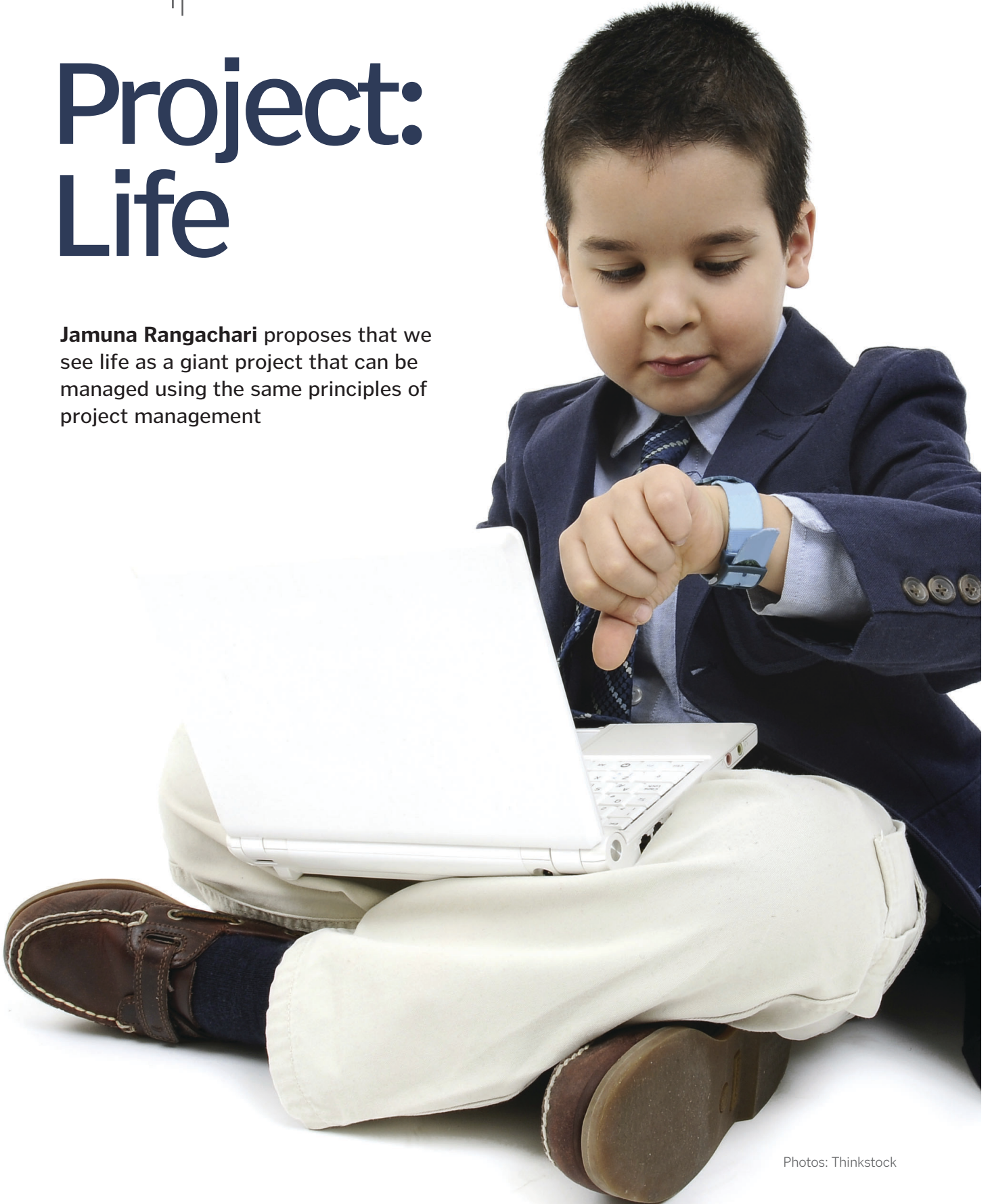


lead story

# Project: Life

**Jamuna Rangachari** proposes that we see life as a giant project that can be managed using the same principles of project management



Photos: Thinkstock

**B**efore I joined *Life Positive* I used to work in the field of software as a project manager. The projects and challenges were diverse, but the process we adopted was pretty much the same. I remember a client working for a tools and logistics company who was hard to please and never satisfied, no matter what we did. Her requirements kept changing and she was never quite clear about what she wanted. Eventually, when most of my team mates were on the verge of giving up on her, we decided to go to her workplace, hoping for more clarity. That is when we understood that the nature of her work itself was quick changing and therefore the fluctuating demands. We decided to make room for these changes by allotting more time for them. Moreover, interacting with her and her team at the place of work helped us to understand their requirements completely, and therefore we were finally able to give her the results she was looking for. It was then that I understood that a project is successful only if everyone is happy, whatever the time taken and technique used.

The lessons I learn from this experience held me in good stead in my life too. I began to look for clarity in the goals or projects that confronted me, whether it was helping my children find the perfect music teacher, or to organise a party for my husband's colleagues. Instead of doing it my way, I spoke to the parties involved as to what were their expectations and what they wanted and why they wanted it. Then I would apply myself to achieving the goal to the satisfaction of all parties.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that life itself is a massive project, or rather a series of ever changing projects that we need to manage. At work, our projects were never static; they kept changing as circumstances changed and we needed therefore to apply ourselves to the changing demands. Isn't that true of life too? You start your day with nothing more complex to resolve than what to cook for dinner only to find your children's school calling you to tell you that your son has fallen from the slide and hurt

himself, or to have an army load of relations descend on you for a visit. Life keeps changing and in order to manage it effectively, we need to be flexible, accepting and creative, just as I would be at work.

### **Mega success**

But the success of these minute projects will not add up to the success of a life unless we are clear about our orientation towards life. What do I want from life? What is going to be my attitude towards life? What are my priorities? What is going to make me happy?

In all projects, the process needs to be understood completely in order to do a good job. In any project, the first thing people are asked to do is to understand the requirements and make a plan for making sure that they can achieve the required results. The real issue in life, however, is that most of us do not know what we want. As there is no clarity on what the requirement is, many of us keep getting lost, moving from one direction to another.



Manikandan Pattabiraman with the harvest of his urban garden





Saurabh Hooda: Bonding through books

And the reason for this is because we do not understand what truly makes us happy. Often, this is not easy; the answers are revealed to us in the process of living life. And even then only if we are alert and aware and listen to the promptings of our heart and soul to understand what makes us happy. Slowly as clarity dawns, our capacity to draw out a project plan strengthens, always keeping in mind that the plan will need to be accommodated to the changing circumstances.

In order to understand the process needed, I have traced the journeys of a few people who seem to have managed the project of their lives with remarkable success.

### **Understanding the requirement**

In the parlance of project management, the first step is to understand one's requirement completely and make a plan for achieving it, no matter how difficult this

may seem at first. People are taught that nothing is impossible, and all one needs to do is to explore the options, of which usually there are many. This is similar to life itself.

Manikandan Pattabiraman, or Mani, from Bangalore, is a 35-year-old self-taught farmer/gardener living in Bengaluru. His proclivity for plants began when he was in the third class in Chennai. He used to help his father plant saplings of tomatoes and brinjal. Eventually, it became his passion and his home was loaded with 100-odd pots growing veggies and ornamental plants.

Gardening took a break once he started college and launched his career as an on-the-move software engineer. But his passion called out to him and in 2008, he restarted his gardening. At that time, he could not get any information on gardening or the availability of materials on the internet that was relevant to India. Sensing a need which he could fulfil through his twin skills in software and gardening, he started a website:

<http://geekgardener.in>, for both novice and experienced gardeners. Eventually, many started asking him for tips on the cultivation of specific crops. Learning all the time from others, he started adding more posts about vegetables that included step-by-step pictures of the process from planting to harvesting the crop. Saurabh Hooda is another 35-year-old software engineer from Delhi who too managed to find a serendipitous link between his work and his passion. He had been reading books for more than a decade. He observed that after a book had been read, it was dumped into a storage box which meant it was practically dead, and of no use to anyone. He started feeling guilty at the thought that a book that had given him so much was left to suffocate in a storage box. He wondered why people could not borrow from or lend to other readers in the neighbourhood, instead of everyone having to buy their own copies. He also discovered that whenever he met someone who had read the book that he had, there would be an instant connect that he terms "a magical moment".

Despite a post graduate degree in business management, Delhi-based Ravi Gulati (47), threw up a corporate career in Canada and returned to India. Exploring new possibilities, he found himself pursuing a six-month-long hands-on course in Environment Education from CEE, Ahmedabad, and was then involved with Trees for Life (later HIMCON), an NGO working with rural Himalayan communities.

Because his elder sister had multiple disabilities, she went to one of the first integrated schools in Delhi. Ravi's mother, Indira, volunteered at that school for almost 20 years, after which she worked for 10 years in another institute that worked with even more severely challenged children. In 1996, Indira, at the age of 62, and after the demise of her husband to cancer, decided to begin Manzil in Kotla Mubarakpur, Delhi, along with a family friend and with Ravi's help. This was an integrated and inclusive school for a spectrum of special pre-school students, including struggling learners and children yet to be admitted into mainstream schools. During afternoons, it doubled as a stitching and tailoring school as well as an adult education centre for the young mothers of these children and others. In a sense, right from inception, Manzil attempted to actualise the oft-repeated slogans, "equal education for all students" and "all students have abilities and talents."

Ravi, in the meanwhile, had decided to settle down in a remote hill village and become an organic farmer. Life, as it often happens, had other plans. When he was still at home in 1997, a washerman's son studying in the 8th class and his friend, a gardener's son, approached him for help in their school maths. Ten minutes with the children unravelled their dubious understanding of numbers. The children were clearly bright and intelligent, but somehow they had been dumbed down by how they were taught at school. Over the weeks and months that followed, the two students asked to include their friends until there were 20 children from various classes; all together because irrespective of the class they were in, all lacked the same basic understanding of what they had been doing for years. Once when Ravi was explaining the mnemonic, BODMAS (Brackets Order Divide Multiply Add Subtract), for the third time for the benefit of a newcomer, one of them protested. He had already understood it well, and wanted to move on. "In that case," Ravi said to him, "I invite you to explain BODMAS to your friend". After some persuasion and promises of back-up support, he reluctantly agreed to try his hand at teaching and, unknowingly to even Ravi then, the foundation of a crucial aspect of life at Manzil was laid, which is that students taught each other. This is the way Ravi moved into educa-

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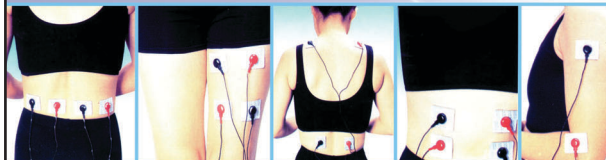
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# Project Life: A primer

To understand the project of life, we have to understand life itself. Some principles based on physics and some based on human nature are given below to help us analyse, design and then execute the project of life.

## Setting goals

Objects have a natural tendency to keep doing what they're doing. If in physics, this is called the law of inertia, in life, it is the comfort zone. Sitting in front of a TV every evening becomes a way of life, as does having junk food. So, the first step would be to set a goal that is achievable, and pushes us out of our comfort zone.

## Forward march

Just as an object in motion will continue to move at the same speed (and direction) unless it is stopped or acted upon by another object/force, if we don't kickstart our system into motion in the right direction, our productivity levels aren't likely to magically increase on their own. Getting started is only part of the solution; learning to set goals and developing the right time management techniques will help us achieve an effective and sustainable "speed" on your journey towards achieving those goals. It may require some effort but once started, productive routines will become second nature.

## Out with the old and in with the new

Newton's third law of motion (the law of action-reaction) states that for every action there is an equal or opposite reaction. In other words, if object A applies force to object B, object B will push back from the opposite direction, with the same amount of force.

For many of us, every day is a battle between productive forces (motivation, focus), and unproductive ones (stress, exhaustion). In order for the productive ones to have a consistent enough lead in our lives to make a difference, we need to create the right patterns and habits. Identifying and eliminating the negative habits isn't always enough; the creation of new, positive ones is equally important.

## Right attitude

The force between the two objects can be either negative or positive, depending on whether the objects are repelled or attracted to one another. Let us think of ourselves as one object and of any one of our goals as another. In this analogy, our mindset is the force between the two objects – it has a direct impact on whether you and your goals are able to connect. A negative mindset force will lead us further away from our goal, while a positive mindset will let us work our way towards our goal and work a lot in making us achieve it.

## Contributing to life

All of us are capable of adding value to the family, organisation, and indeed to the world. This makes us feel valuable. For this, we need to keep looking around, even if we feel we have found our vision. Life after all, is about growing all the time.

## Relationships matter

As Krishnamurti said, life is relationships. If we do not know how to relate to others and to love, our lives will be arid and devoid of the life force, which in turn will stop our dreams from flowering.

## Get your priorities right

We need to ensure that we never compromise on those people, activities or goals that are extremely important to us. As Stephen Covey said, do not neglect the important in order to do the urgent.

## Create an interesting people fund

An interesting people fund is a strategy to understand life in all its dimensions. By pre-committing time and money to meeting interesting people, the mind works more actively. In the process, we increase the likelihood that we also become part of the interesting people fund for someone else, thus forming a group of people who lead an interesting life.

## Envision your legacy

We need to have a vision to follow. It is only a vision that creates reality. This does not mean there will be no obstacles. There may be many problems, hitches and challenges. Still, if our vision is strong and has a lot of passion, it is bound to materialise in one way or the other. Again, the vision itself may change as life itself is dynamic.

## Have fun

We should never underestimate the importance of enjoying ourselves. This will also make us focussed and not stressed when we wish to achieve something. The best, of course, is if we had fun in our vocation itself and led a life that epitomises what Robert Frost said in his famous poem.

'My object in living is to unite, My avocation and my vocation

As my two eyes make one in sight.

Only where love and need are one,

And the work is play for mortal stakes,

Is the deed ever really done

For Heaven and the future's sakes

## Master life

Let us always remember that we have the power to make ourselves masters and not slaves of all the forces that work on us so that we can be masters of the project of our own life.

We need to be clear that the only person we need to please is ourselves and everything will then surely fall in place, slowly but surely.



tion, almost without any plan to do so. It almost seemed as if the universe had conspired to make education the passion of his life.

Young people today pursue their dreams as soon as they get them. A case in point is 22-year-old Prisiliya Madan who set out to discover the country by bicycle, from Panvel, 50 km from Mumbai, in December 2015. Young Prisiliya had always loved travelling, which made her cycling trip a natural next step. She trained herself, but did not map out an exact itinerary. One of her missions was to understand the culture of the people and places she met. So she decided to stay wherever she could and set off.

As we can see, everyone who had a sincere dream to do something started working towards it diligently.

As Dadashree, a spiritual master and the founder of MaitriBodhPariwar says, "No matter what dream you want to fulfil, irrespective of it conflicting with the mainstream life, one has to prepare oneself in and out



Ravi Gulati threw up a prestigious career in Canada to pursue education

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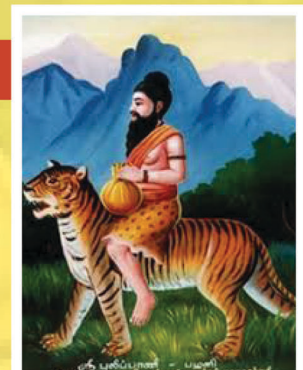
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Prisiliya Madan: Riding towards confidence and courage

music, painting, dance, and theatre. To popularise these offerings, he also created a website: <http://manzil.in/>. Thanks to the more pragmatic approach to education, the children of Manzil flourished. Having made a clear difference to their lives, Ravi is a happy man. He says, "I always wanted to do something significant in life. Manzil gave me the human connect I was looking for." Manzil has indeed given Ravi his manzil (destination).

Prisiliya had a fabulous journey. A Facebook page - titled 'I 'Pride' helped her friends and family stay updated on the progress of her solitary pilgrimage. During her 19 days on the road, she passed through lonely stretches on the Western Ghats, but never faced any threat despite riding alone. Pedalling helped increase her 'patience' and even her public speaking skills. She spoke to the girls of at least three colleges in Kerala, impressing on them the need to look beyond academic excellence, and to

totally to be able to experience it in reality."

### The discovery

Unlike regular management where the steps usually remain the same, in project management, there is always a need to re-examine if what we thought and assumed first remains valid. This makes it similar to life where things keep changing dynamically all the time.

After registering his centre at Khan Market and educating the children there, Ravi pondered on the purpose of education, especially for the children who came to him. He understood that the parents of his children sent them to school primarily to help them get good jobs, Ravi realised that it was not just maths but a knowledge of English that would dramatically improve their chances of landing good jobs. Hence, he started classes in spoken English, which the children slowly began to master. He also started offering multiple classes at various levels in maths, English, computers,

embark on journeys of their own.

Mani left his job in 2013 and started a company to promote urban vegetable gardens, and provide consultations to people who wished to take this up. He also started a store, Garden Guru, to make all the gardening material available to gardeners. His website, <http://geekgardener.in>, is also kept updated all the time. Despite the multiple demands on his time, Mani is a happy man, for he loves what he does.

In order to connect book readers in every neighbourhood across the globe so that they too could feel those 'magical moments', Saurabh started Lenro (<https://lenro.co>) using his technical prowess to create it in a user-friendly manner.

As we have seen, the journey of life itself makes all of us stronger and more robust.

### Finding happiness

A successful project is one in which all stakeholders are happy with the outcome.

"Deep happiness can only be found if we dissolve the false dichotomy of either me or others and become a part of a 'collective self' without any boundaries," says Ravi. As a child, he had played



cricket in the neighbourhood with children from all backgrounds (even though he says he had the 'good' sense to discern who he could take home and who he couldn't). Now that he was old enough to understand the context of his 'don't-take-home' friends, he 'saw' their lives anew. Years later, he read a Sri Lankan social worker's words that he completely resonated with, "You build the road, and the road builds you".

After spending 18 nights during her 1,800 km journey and living in the homes of strangers, Prisiliya reached the Southern tip of the country on January 5th, 2016. She had learnt what it meant to be alone and to make friends wherever she went. Most of all, she had become extremely confident and courageous.

Although Mani is now focussed fully on his passion, he has not left software completely. He still writes apps to help himself in gardening and hydroponics. He is also working on apps related to gardening which he will be releasing soon. This balance between software and gardening has made him completely content with life.

Saurabh too left his job and is now completely focussing on Lenro. "Our dreams are the milestones to our passion. Once you have the dreams, you don't have to chase them, your dreams will chase you. They will wake you up early in the morning

and will not let you sleep," he says passionately.

### The journey continues

The primary difference between a management project and the project of life is that life as a project is neverending. One dream leads to another and hence, the requirements keep expanding.

The more we focus on what we can do and not on what we cannot do, our life is bound to expand and grow. This is the way of the universe, whether we call it serendipity, grace, karma, or the Law of Attraction.



Jamuna Rangachari writes and manages the websites of *Life Positive*. She has authored three books for children, compiled and interpreted Teaching Stories-I and II for *Life Positive*, and published a book through Hay House

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