

After the Teambuilding

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Tips for Maximizing Change Efforts

Distinctions That Shape a Project Manager

First in a Series on Project Management

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After the Teambuilding
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Introduction

This series is designed to strengthen your relationship with projects and project management from a variety of viewpoints as well as educate you in the nuts and bolts

For our purposes here, projects are "results to be produced which require a certain investment of time, resources and commitment from those involved."

In this issue, without getting too deeply into project design, we will look at some of the distinctions that contribute to being effective at project management and managing a project team. We won't be dealing with any of the current buzzwords, such as "quality tools" and "critical path-ing."¹ In future issues we will discuss coaching, team management and project design.

A Most Important Resource

The most important resource for any project is the project manager. The project manager guides the project, knows the project inside-out and has the completion of the project as a priority.

It is not important that the project manager know how to accomplish everything involved with the project. It is important that a project manager have a powerful relationship with the distinctions of project management. These are outlined below, each followed by a discussion.

As you read through these distinctions, check out how you, as a project manager, relate to them. Don't assume that under-

standing an element is the ultimate goal. Understanding it only allows you to explain it. Examine what you think, why you think it and *from which paradigm* you think it.

Paradigm

First, let's look at what is meant by paradigm, a favorite buzzword of the '90s. Often referred to as a mental model, a paradigm is the context for information. The paradigm determines how that information is processed; what is noticed and ignored; what is heard and not heard and, ultimately, *what is possible and what is not.*

- ◆ Before Roger Bannister, a British athlete, ran the mile in less than four minutes in 1954, it was considered impossible — outside the paradigm — to do so. Soon after Bannister's breakthrough, however, many runners completed the mile in less than four minutes.

- ◆ The CEO of Western Union declined the opportunity to manufacture the telephone. From his paradigm, it was a useless device.

- ◆ More recently, a small electronics company in California invented digital television. They didn't know it was considered to be against the laws of physics — outside the paradigm — by the scientists working for the U.S. government.

As you evaluate yourself on the following distinctions, ask yourself, "What are my assumptions about this?" "What am I overlooking here?" or "What do I think is outside my paradigm?" If you ask yourself these questions, you will find yourself taking a fresher approach to project management.

¹ See my newsletter "Communication or Coverup: Working with Jargon," July/August 1996 for tips on how to deal with mystery terms.

Distinctions

• **The Future** — How do you relate to the future? Is the future one in which your goal is achieved, or is it one in which your goal *might* be achieved.

Stand in that future and look back to the present² What do you see? If you stand in the future, you see the completed steps along the way — obstacles overcome — and can then produce unprecedented results. But if you stand in the present and look into the future, you see only the obstacles and difficulties.

Standing in a future in which your project is completed will give you a powerful relationship to the project results and any problems that arise.

Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.

Arthur Schopenhauer, 1851

• **Vision** — Essentially, the vision for the project is the answer to the question, “Why am I doing this project?” The vision connects the project to something bigger and more important than the project itself. It establishes the project as a part of the value chain of the organization, linking it to the strategy of the department or company *and* linking it to your personal vision.

Your vision and the vision of your teammates is a critical part of the project. The vision of the project is the context in which the project will be accomplished. Stating the vision frequently will allow day-to-day concerns to be viewed in their proper perspective.

• **Specific Measurable Result** — Can the outcome of your project be described in specific and measurable terms? Is your goal to “work on X” or to “produce Y”? You get what you focus on. If you focus on activity, you will get activity; if you focus on results, you will get results.

²This concept is clearly explained in “The Merlin Factor: Leadership and Strategic Intent,” by Charles Smith in *Business Strategy Review*, Spring 1994.

It may seem silly to stress this point. But many an effort has been stymied by focusing on the process (*e.g., complete 15 customer service calls per hour*) rather than results (*fix the customers problems*). Recognizing this can take much of the mystery out of projects.

• **Risk** — Each project requires many risks, including the risk of putting your word on a completion date or time. Risk could mean speaking straight to someone who has promised you over and over again to get something done and hasn’t. It could mean declining a politically correct request because it would endanger your project. Risk takes many forms and if you are not willing to risk, you will limit your future, not expand it.

• **Failure** — We avoid failure. After all, we want to be known for our successes and our range of accomplishments, *not* for our failures.

But Henry Ford said, “Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” How many times have you missed your goal, but learned something very valuable? How many times have you failed, but stretched yourself beyond what you thought you could do? If you are willing to fail then you won’t find it necessary to find excuses for your failures. You will be able to examine what happened and build the company’s knowledge base.

The magic component is value. Is it worth risking failure for the possible value to be obtained? Is there sufficient accomplishment available in the project to justify the risk?

I am not suggesting that you be casual about what you promise, just alert to when you are “playing” too small (staying inside your paradigm).

• **Systems** — Your project does not take place in a vacuum. The other work you have, the other projects you are engaged in, the other promises you have made and the people you work with make up a system in which you work. You must take it all into account when determining what new promises you can make.

Too many times deadlines are based on ideal time lines, which do not take other obligations into account.

The actions your project requires will also have unpredictable side effects. You can forecast many of these, but it is impossible to predict all of them.

• **Alignment** — Is your project aligned with the strategy of your department? Your other commitments? If it is not aligned with the other projects on which you are working, and/or the direction in which your department is going, then maybe it should be reconsidered. It may be a good idea, but not the one for you or your department now.

• **Personal Development** — Decide what you want to get from this project. Do you need more visibility? Do you want to develop your leadership skills? Do you want to learn about the subject matter of the project? Whatever your personal agenda is, be clear about it. Record it, let your manager know what it is, and check in regularly to make sure you are getting what you need from your participation on the project.

It is fine to have your own interests at heart. It is not petty. You are part of the company and a valuable resource. It is appropriate that you develop yourself in the course of working on a major project.

By the same token, you should work with your team to make sure they are also being developed during the project.

Putting it Together

A great project manager has a strong relationship to these distinctions. They will serve you and your company for years to come. Projects are becoming the life-blood of most organizations. The better you can manage projects, the more valuable you will be to your company — and, ultimately, *any* company. ♦

Watch for more in this series in upcoming newsletters. They will cover Coaching, Project Design, Team Management, and other important project management tools.
