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Sense of Urgency – The Missing “Project” Link

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Introduction

Maybe it's due to my Type A DNA, but I've noticed something very disturbing about project teams recently, they just don't have a sense of urgency anymore. This is not the uncontrolled running from the burning house urgency, but the drive to kick the competitor's backside! In fact over the last couple of years it has become obvious that the sense of urgency amongst my project team members has taken the path of Jurassic Age dinosaurs – a future as compost. It's as if they've lost the battle before the very first team meeting. What was once a vibrant group of people, like fans at an NFL game (Raider fans excluded), has transformed into high school seniors at a library. Individuals struggling to complete homework, while waiting for the bell to ring so they can escape and do something more enjoyable.

Has project history with its inherent propensity for delays taken the edge off of teams? Has the frustration of the typical project journey that traveled 25 miles to transverse a mire 10 feet after missteps and redirections pushed team members to reserve energy to survive? Has the constant threat of layoffs and the desire for self-survival, fostered an environment where workers know that hard work doesn't always pay? Well, as US teams crawl at a steady pace throughout a project, global competitors outpace us to market with superior products and services.

It has become so bad at times, that team members in close proximity fail to meet face-to-face to discuss issues. Instead sending the occasional email that ends up being unread until it's on the critical path. Even the functional barriers that 1980s business books tried to mitigate have come back into fashion. Everyone is waiting for someone, anyone to tell them what to do, when to do it and how to do it? Independence of thought, creativity, and tenacity, has been lobotomized from team members. There is just no energy to speak of when it comes to project teams.

However, ask these individuals how things are going on the project, and what follows is a diatribe about problems ending with all sorts of recommendations for improving the team's success. Ideas such as more accurate specifications in the beginning, more frequent meetings, more ongoing communications of project status, extending help to functions that are behind or bringing in outside support are uttered. Asking these individuals why they didn't attempt to implement some of these very common sense suggestions results in nothing more than a blank stare. What causes the person making suggestions to become paralyzed when asked to act on them?

Imagine if Bear Grylls the outdoor adventurer and star of *Man Vs. Wild* was stranded with these teams, he'd probably end up dying. His only chance for survival would be to babysit them, because most couldn't even pick a banana for sustenance. What evil phenomena has taken away a team's once proud sense of camaraderie and drive that previously resulted in man landing on the moon, curing numerous diseases and developing the Internet? As a project leader, what can be done to transform this listless, ragtag group and turn them into a lean, mean, fighting machine?

Where to Start

By now you might be thinking that the easiest path forward is to fire the leader ala George Steinbrenner, hire a new one, spend money to shore up the team and all will be rosy – basically the Yankee's recipe for success. Well if it was that simple, the Yankees would've won another World Series over the last 12 years and failing projects could be overhauled. However, we know that project success is analogous to starting a new business or marriage – there is a high probability of a catastrophe.

As with all things related to projects and their management, there are plenty of reasons behind team failure and success, as well as team urgency. After all, the combination of unique individuals with different skills, cultures, motivations and personality types is especially suitable for dysfunctional dynamics. So as with most problems in today's society and with the sheer mention of George, not Bush or Clooney, but Steinbrenner, a start at the top to undercover a drain of team urgency is in order.

Leadership

Leaders usually get too much credit if things go well and too much blame if things go wrong. However in terms of influence on an organization, their stamp on a team's sense of urgency is undeniable. Jack Welch preached to his managers that each business unit had to be number 1 or 2 in the market or die trying – his clear message changed the core personality of General Electric (GE). A manager having no sense of urgency or drive at GE quickly positioned themselves for the unemployment line. Clearly Welch's influence through senior management and his own vibrato resonated throughout the company. In turn, managers at GE made sure to echo the employee's role in achieving Welch's vision.

Having worked both at a Fortune 500 company and several small ones, my experience has been the opposite of what one would envision. Empowered teams with a drive to succeed were more common place in the Fortune 500 Company than in the small supposedly nimble companies. Each company had a Phases and Gates process to guide the project team, as well as a talented pool of team members. The big difference was the leader at the top of the organization that dictated the strategy and the keys to success.

Maybe I was fortunate to be on several very successful projects during my time at the Fortune 500 Company. Since leaving this company my experience as a project leader has been very frustrating even with skilled project teams. Each time, the leader never really had a clear vision for the company with a well-defined strategy to achieve his or her vision. Product specifications were marginal at best, funding and staffing were inadequate, all decisions had to be made from top-down and the trust in people's ability to perform a job was rare.

Driven teams had a leader that provided a clear objective, adequate funding, freedom to make decisions and trust in the team's ability to succeed even when faced with impossible odds. These ingredients mixed with a decent project leader more frequently led to a timely market introduction of a new product or service. You might ask, why decent project leader and not supreme, because the team, not any individual made the project successful.

So what happens when a project manager is faced with a situation where there is a leadership void? The project manager must assume the leadership role and start to work on the ingredients for success – a clear specification, adequate staffing and funding, decision rights and some autonomy. The best way to approach this is based on data, staying away from the tried and true method of blaming the organization for your problems and all but guaranteeing program failure. The project manager must show the required tasks to introduce the product or service with realistic dates for key milestones, required resources to get there and potential issues preventing success. Too often, project managers don't provide realistic dates due to management pressure, with the result being a late and over budget project.

Individuals

Teams that were once dominated by the Type A leader and Type B followers have now been replaced by Type C people. Type C is my term for Comatose, those individuals that attend meetings (mostly to take up space) and only react if led by someone. It is not that these team members are bad or lack talent, it's just that they rarely take a proactive approach to projects or display the resolve needed to compete in today's global economy. While these Type C's continue to live and impede time-to-market, competitors with a greater sense of urgency and survival instincts are pushing them even closer to extinction.

Many times, the project leader is handed a team, based on what the functional organizations are willing to provide. If there is a clear benefit for a particular function, there is a higher probability of management sending one of their A-players. However, even if you are handed the responsibility of picking your team, there is no guarantee that success is inevitable. Working in the business world is far different than picking the neighborhood friend who is far superior to everyone else in athletic ability for a sandlot baseball game. In the business world, there are no Michael Jordan's, an individual who can solely make a project successful even if surrounded by a weak team. Basketball has just five players, so the impact of one can be significant, business teams could be hundreds, making the odds of any one person more important than the rest of the team less significant.

Now Bear Grylls would be a great member of any team, how can you go wrong with someone who entered the Guinness Book of Records as the youngest Briton to climb Mount Everest at twenty three? Bear is a person that has a calm urgency in perilous situations and always finds a creative way out. What an asset he would be for a project team stranded in the wilderness of the business world.

So what can a project manager do with the As, Bs, and Cs? First thing, work on the weakest links since the team's forward progress is based on their pace. Take time to understand every member's capabilities: strengths and weaknesses. The goal here is to see if there is something about the individual that could trigger their sense of urgency. Play the role of Dr. Phil and figure out what intrinsically drives each person. It is the project manager's job to match people and tasks in the most appropriate manner to reach the end goal. Good project managers have a key awareness of their players and how to get the most out of them for the benefit of the team. A great example of this is what Phil Jackson was able to do with the divergent egos of Shaq and Kobe in order to win the NBA Championship.

Sometimes after careful assessment of the end goals and the human resources at your hand – drastic steps might be necessary – such as the permanent removal of some team members. Clearly this is not what project manager's savor, but there are times when this is absolutely necessary. The whole team cannot be slowed to a crawl because of one person. No company can afford a team of snails, unless there is some melted butter and garlic around. Never underestimate the impact one negative or incapable person can have on a team. This can sink a team faster than the iceberg that submerged the Titanic. I've experienced a drastic increase in urgency when a poisonous team member was transferred to another department or sent packing.

Launch Date (The Finish Line!)

As stated earlier, great leaders not only provide the tools for teams to succeed, but also drive them to the impossible in terms of time-to-market goals. Leaders have to tell teams where the finish line is in the project race. Finish lines that get a collective "Say that again!" or "Say what!" when heard by the team. Steve Jobs at Apple fits this bill because his innovative spirit drives everything at Apple with great success. There is no way Apple could've launched so many innovative products like the iPod without the employees having a great sense of urgency. But having leaders like this are atypical in today's world.

Too often, leaders, really managers, somehow naively think that what comes out of their mouth for launch dates, even if unrealistic, will happen. I call this the Field of Dreams approach; state it and it will happen. Well Field of Dreams was a movie, a fantasy of how a father and son reconnect through baseball. What happens in movies doesn't usually occur in business. Leaders have to understand the effort needed to achieve a particular project and push teams to the limit, therefore fostering a sense of urgency. However, there are those who are ignorant to the sheer magnitude of a task or short change the team in terms of resources, which defeats urgency from the get-go.

There is nothing more frustrating and demoralizing to a project team's sense of urgency than being handed a seat of the pants launch date. Exceptions to this rule are directly correlated to the leader's capability. However, leaders that can inspire a team are outliers – a statistically small portion of the population. Project leaders still must take the launch date and figure out how to achieve these often lofty goals, even though the over simplification of projects makes the task quite difficult.

Part of the team's charter should be the ability to intelligently select a launch date based on a specification, appropriate resources and freedom to make decisions. Again, this is a fantasy, but no team ever really receives all that is required to be successful. Still, the project team must take what's handed to them, formulate a plan of attack and commit to a launch date – this has to be a key output of the team. If management pushes back, the project manager should be prepared to go back to his or her team to see if the new date can be met in some creative manner.

What should a project manager do in terms of product or service launch date? The project manager must fight to enable the team to analyze the project and come up with a feasible launch date – one that everyone agrees to. Better yet, multiple launch dates taking into consideration “what if” scenarios in terms of all success, probable based on past history and with unlimited resources. The ability for a team to own the end date is one of the best motivators I've seen to truly drive the urgency of the team. Teams don't want to be given the ownership of committing to a launch date and then falling flat on a sword in front of management. Teams have a genuine sense of pride because upper management has given them the freedom to utilize their skills to determine what is possible. With this single act, management has leveraged the team's experience, skills and knowledge, and provided an incentive for team urgency.

Motivation

The standard answer for motivating a team and fueling their sense of urgency could be the old standby – money, money, money. However each person's uniqueness in terms of skills and capabilities also comes with uniqueness in what motivates them. One size doesn't fit all, especially when it comes to project teams. Today project managers are also faced with the turtle in the shell syndrome, the turtles (project members) are very scared to peak their head and commit to anything, with the possible implications of being the first to go when layoffs occur. Many find it safer to quietly move in lock step with the herd and hope someone else is given their walking papers.

I've been in organizations that have provided yearly employee bonuses, management by objective bonuses, periodic recognition awards and all sorts of incentives to motivate project teams. Personally, my motivation is taking on a project that has difficult terrain to navigate and succeeding against all odds. The sheer challenge of the project motivates me above and beyond any monetary reward. Now wouldn't it be great to have a whole team of my clones;

that would make the motivation part pretty easy. As mentioned earlier, picking the players on the team is rarely an option, so assuming there is a way to somehow screen people with identical forms of motivation is impossible.

So what can the project manager do in order to motivate a team of diverse characters to drive their sense of urgency and move the project forward? How about taking the KISS approach and in the very beginning of the project have team members verbalize what motivates them. This is a great way to get team interaction on a subject hopefully near and dear to their heart. I've used this with brainstorming rules to enable the team's imagination to run wild. By not squelching creativity, forms of recognition from chartered flights to Paris for shopping and dinner to a round of golf with Tiger Woods at Augusta National are mentioned. With each member trying to outdo the others to roars of laughter!

Putting the fun aside, these sessions always yield some great recognition ideas that can be applied throughout the program to fuel team urgency at various times in the project. In fact some of the teams I've been a part of have had separate recognition schedules that line up with project milestones. Another thing that works is the element of surprise, such as bringing donuts or bagels to team meetings, a hand written note about going above and beyond or an email to a team member's boss about their contributions to the team. My most memorable recognition to date was a note my high school basketball coach wrote about my contribution to the team even though I spent most of the season warming the bench. It was a hand written note sent to my parents that I have to this day.

Conclusion

Question - A highly skilled and motivated team striving to achieve the impossible based on the direction of a visionary leader certainly must have a sense of urgency? Answer - maybe and maybe not. Why? Creating a sense of urgency among teams involves human beings and unfortunately, humans are flawed (unique) assets that don't always mix into a lean, mean fighting machine. However, if you're on a team, with or without great leadership, engaged peers, excellent incentives and a stretch goal that drives success, you can make a difference.

Let's call the difference "The Wave," yes, that famous stadium antic where an individual (and some of his or her drunken friends) can get a group of between 80,000 and 100,000 fans to do something in unison. Though I'm certainly not condoning drinking on the job or having people perform "The Wave" in a conference room, there is much to be said about the impact one person can have on the team, even the imperfect ones that are the norm today. It is never easy to be the individual who acts differently from the project herd; in fact if others don't follow it can be down right embarrassing. In fact in the animal kingdom, straying from the herd can place you on the dinner table of a hungry pack of lions. However, as a project leader, your role is to be the one making the bold move to lead the herd.

The project leader has to analyze what is missing from the team and compensate for it so the team can get back their mojo - a sense of urgency. It can take the form of leading the team,

carefully matching team skills to tasks, articulating an impossible but plausible launch date, and providing creative recognition awards along the way. Additionally the project leader must understand that what continues to fuel the fire of urgency will change throughout the program, so what worked early on, might not as the team closes in on the launch date. If the project leader is not willing to take a chance by starting “The Wave,” he or she shouldn’t be in charge! Great players like Michael Jordan want the ball at the end of a game and project leaders must showcase that same confidence and commitment to their team. In a good project leader’s (or leader’s) mind, no one else is better able to help the team succeed than them. Praying that someone else will take the leadership role is just unacceptable.

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