Vision to Value: Executing Initiatives Successfully[1]

By Todd C. Williams, PMP

Abstract

Value: The lynch-pin of successful businesses. What drives business must drive our initiatives and projects. Although scope, schedule, and budget are key factors in project success, both initiatives and their constituent projects must deliver value. Meeting "the big three" is no guarantee of a positive outcome. Instead consistently track value and make adjustments to the triple constraints to attain sufficient value. Arguably value is the project manager's most critical deliverable in the project. It requires significant insight into the business objectives, the project's customer, and a thorough understanding of the needs over the wants. This is key to executing initiatives successfully. Project managers must lead (leading subordinates, leaders, and customers), assign priorities based on a global view, and know when to say no.

Vision to Value

Initiative success rates are dismally low. Failures in constituent projects, lack of adoption, trouble in change management name just a few of the reasons. Estimates for success rates range from only 25% to 40%[i, ii, iii] of all projects meet the end users expectations. To understand this problem one has to understand what makes an initiative successful. Experience indicates that most companies believe that it is completing its component projects within the scope, schedule, and budget defined at the onset of the project. I disagree. It requires planning, communication, adaptability, and change management.

A Tale of Failure

Let's explore a project that most of us are aware of and see if this definition applies. The project is the deployment of the Hubble Space Telescope—the history being in the public domain. The concept of a space telescope was conceived in in 1923 by the scientist Hermann Oberth; however, it took until the 1970s for technology to catch up and allow it to be considered feasible. In 1977 the project was funded with $200,000,000 and a projected launch date in 1983. The spacecraft, however, did not enter final assembly until 1985. Launch finally occurred in 1990 with delays coming from scope changes[iv] and the Shuttle Challenger tragedy. Heralded as a huge achievement everyone waited for telescope stabilization and the transmission of first spectacular images. Unfortunately, the images were anything but spectacular. NASA was faced with an orbiting telescope originally priced at $400MM and had ballooned to $2.5 Billion, was

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[1] *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 9th Annual University of Texas at Dallas Project Management Symposium in August 2015. It is republished here with permission of the author and conference organizers.*

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seven years late, with a "spherical aberration" in a mal-manufactured mirror. In other words, the mirror was ground incorrectly and could not focus on distant images. To any astronomer a poorly manufactured mirror is the cardinal sin. NASA had missed the basics in Astronomy 101. The mirror is the primary component of any telescope and to have it built wrong was simply inconceivable.

Scientists eventually developed a solution and in 1993 a shuttle visit delivered and installed a high-tech set of contact lenses that allowed the Hubble Space Telescope to deliver the stunning images that most of us have become so familiar with.

But the story does not end there. In 2003, shuttle tragedy struck again and the loss of the Columbia forced NASA to restrict all flights to orbits that could take safe harbor in the International Space Station. The orbit of the Hubble, however, is not coincident with the space station and the final Hubble servicing mission was canceled. The reaction was immediate and resounding. Hundreds of millions of people complained forcing Congress and NASA to develop an alternate solution over deorbiting the telescope. In 2009, the final servicing mission was flown on Shuttle Atlantis, with the Shuttle Endeavor in full ready to be launched if troubles on Atlantis arose[v].

The question to the readers who believe in the posited definition of success is, "How can a project that was over 6 times its original cost, was ten years late (doubling the timeline), and did not function as designed, get to be so successful as to merit the risk to human life to prolong the service of its product?"

It had missed the commonly used measures of success—scope, schedule, and budget—and was a successful for one reason only. To the millions of laypeople of the United States (who could lobby Congress) and hundreds of millions of laypeople around the world the Hubble Space Telescope had value—value that was measured in pictures and discoveries that fueled imagination, hope, and dreams. It is the intangible attribute of value that makes a project successful.

The Components of Vision Execution

How, then, do we execute successful initiatives? The answer is more than simply decomposing the vision into a set of goals, initiatives, and projects. These items must continually stay aligned through successful delivery, which could take years. This requires continual re-evaluation of the projects to ensure they are still targeting the correct goals in an ever changing business environment. By doing this, goals are met, value is delivered, and success is achieved.

The required change in our companies is that the project team must understand the vision and the strategic goals. The team must see how those goals change as the business environment changes and adjust its deliverables to match. It must understand and select people with the right attitudes and skills that help make those goals a reality. Only then, once the team knows where it is headed, can it define the processes to follow.

Process, often considered the foundation of project management, can be a project's bane. Too little process and the project will spiral out of control, too much and it will flail under the stifling

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weight of bureaucracy. The project's domain and its people's capabilities determine the level of process required. The higher the chance to loss of life or money and the lower the accountability of the people, the larger the role that process will play.

When all else is in place, we can focus on technology. Its role is to improve efficiency. Technology applied to ineffective people using poor process only makes your project get into trouble faster, albeit very efficiently. Today's culture often believes technology is the answer, but it is only a means to an end. As in the introductory example, neither sophisticated testing technology nor the reams of NASA procedures saved the Hubble Space Telescope from its improperly manufactured mirror; it was human haste that pushed the production cycle and bypassed proper testing.

Aligning the Organization

Once the key infrastructure of strategy, people, process, and technology are in place communication trumps all. The challenge is to adopt a format usable throughout the organization. It must keep people focused on the strategic goals, flexible enough to accommodate changes in the business environment, and understandable throughout the breadth of business acumen of the people in the organization. It must relay four distinct areas of focus—the company's financial needs, the target customer's problem statement, the initiatives the company must instantiate to meet those goals, and how the company must grow to be able to execute those initiatives. There are many tools that help with this process, but I will use the balance scorecard defined by Norton and Kaplan to illustrate the concept[vi].

Financial

For any company or organization to survive there must be financial goals. Whether the organization's goals are to make a profit or provide services, without financial goals it will fail. These three to four goals must be clear and concise. Filtered through the customer's needs, these goals must ultimately be supported by the organization's projects.
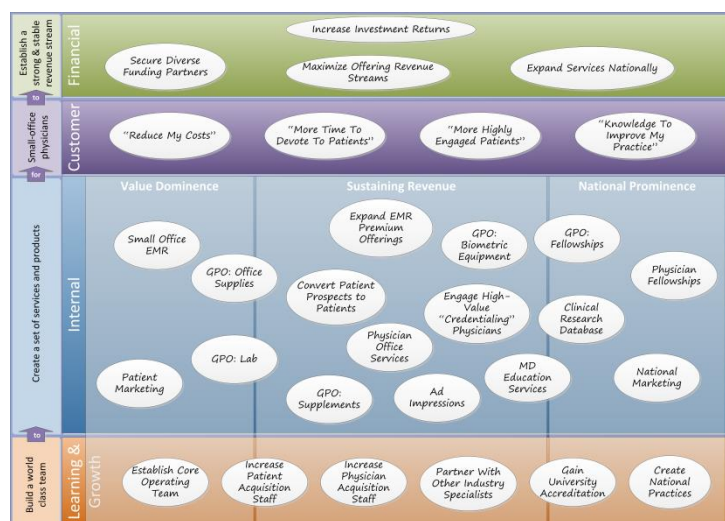
Customer

Most visible and tangible to the organization is the customer's needs. These are often described in terms a customer would use. As shown in the example, they are often in quotes to underscore this point. As with the financial goals, these should be limited to a reasonable number of objectives. Optimally this consists of three to five goals. Every component of every project must be easily mapped to one or more of these items.

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This is a crucial concept that everyone in the organization must understand. From the executive to the individual contributor, everyone must ask how their tasks contribute to meeting the customer needs and support the financial goals of the company. If a component of a project fails to align to one of these goals that component should be removed from the project as it is diverting resources from achieving strategic goals. It is incumbent on the project manager and executive sponsor working together to ensure this rule is followed. Failing to achieve this is the primary source of scope creep that results in late delivery and budget overruns. Worse is that often these additional features are not what the customer needs or wants. The result is projects and initiatives delivering insufficient value.

Internal

The bulk of the strategy map is the internal needs section. This often consists of dozens of initiatives that must be completed to achieve the corporate goals. Each bubble could be a small as an individual project or as large as a multi-year initiative. They are, however, all decomposed into projects that provide some new capability to the organization. These are not operational activities (often represented in an activity map). Strategy, as Michael Porter points out in his seminal work published by Harvard Business Review, *What is Strategy?,* "attempts to achieve sustainable competitive advantage by preserving what is distinctive about a company"[vii]. Improving operational effectiveness is not strategic, since every company has to do this to reduce cost, stay competitive, and remain relevant.

Learn and Grow

At the base of the strategy map is the description of how the company must grow and what the people must learn. This section of the strategy map may contain initiatives to buy other companies, build or buy new buildings, hire specific expertise, train employees, and the like.

Telling the Story

Upon completing the strategy map, anyone in the company should be able to describe the goals of the company and how he or she is supporting it. In fact, many people often use the left hand column to generate the statement as to the type of work people should be doing that can be read from the bottom up. In the example map that statement is: "Build a world class team to create a set of services and products for integrative medicine physicians to establish a strong and stable revenue stream"

Execution

As can be seen, there can be a huge number of initiatives in a strategy map. Any company attempting to do all of these at the same time will fail. This is for two reasons—initiative precedence and spreading the team too thin.

Any organization must walk before it can run. Key infrastructural changes must be in place to support the higher level functions. For this reason, when generating a strategy map, there is an implementation order implied in its design. Execution starts in the lower left hand corner and proceeds to the upper right corner. This not only applies to the lower two levels of the map, but also the customer and financial elements. The result is the prioritization of meeting customer needs as some are fulfilled sooner than others. The same is true for financial elements.

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If one develops a strategy map for a department or division of a company, basic processes going in the lower left while more strategic go to the right. If this is done, say, for an IT organization, implementing email or establishing reproducible transaction processing will need to be implemented and perfected long before it will be able to develop new applications for customer's mobile devices.

Projects Deliver Capabilities

For each of the projects that comprise these initiatives the project manager must deliver capabilities that provide value to the end-user. The executive sponsor must support these efforts.[viii] Time is value's enemy. Value is lost by delivering the wrong functionality or delivering it at too high a cost. The longer it takes to deliver a capability costs the organization extra money in deployment and in lost opportunity costs. Lost opportunity, which is very difficult to measure, often defeats a strategy as a competitor comes to market sooner with a solution to meet the customer's needs.

Additionally, prolonging the time-to-customer removes critical early customer input on whether you are meeting the customer's needs. Missing this early valuable input destroys an organization's ability to make mid-course corrections.

At this point we can point back to the initial premise of how a strategy is realized—through the prioritized execution of strategy, getting the right people, implementing the proper process, and using technology were needed.

- The map defines the strategy with its foundation in people.
- People instantiate the initiatives and projects with minimal process in a staged manner that delivers value to the customer.
- Technology only provides efficiencies to rapidly enhance the capabilities and improve the customer experience.

Value, the Project Manager's Deliverable

A project manager's job is to deliver value. Achieving the original schedule, budget, and features are meaningless if the project fails to meet its value objectives. As with all simple statements, this is much easier said than accomplished. Projects managers must assemble adaptable teams that use flexible, lean methodologies focused on this same core value. Arrogantly selling the latest technology or tool is narcissistic. Focus must be on value. Be vigilant at ensuring the required information is always available for the customer to reassess the project's value and for the project team to reevaluate their proposal.

Value Equations Won't Work

The first task is determining the customer's initial value objective. Most projects start with the premise that they provide considerable value. However, numerous assumptions are made in justifying that value. Many of these ill-founded hopes fail to survive the test of time, being proven false in the early stages of the project. As we all know, time begets change. Realities adjust as

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the customer learns about the product's possibilities, business models morph, and challenges arise in building the product. The project must transform to meet these needs and the project manager must lead this shifting vision.

At times, it is more than a gradual shift. Elucidation of major difficulties, discovery of poorly understood requirements, and loss of business segments, name a few reasons to step back and reconsider the project's original premise. The most radical change a project manager can propose is terminating the project. Once the projected value falls dangerously close to zero, the value proposition is invalid and the only sensible solution is ceasing the project. This is not failure. It is leadership at its finest.

Facilitating Increased Value

Value equals the benefit reduced by the cost. Costs are generally quantifiable; however, benefits are often intangible. Goodwill, trust, reputation, esthetics, and usability are but a few attributes that can add significant value to a product. In addition to developing the project's cost, project managers must help the customer enumerate all of the benefits.

For the customer to define value, project managers must supply the information on how the product will or could function. There are no constraints to the original concept, added costs, thrown away work, or extensions to the delivery date are all part of the make-up of the product. The task is to objectively deliver the complete story and let the customer decide the next step.

This does not mean the project manager does everything the customer asks. The project manager must work with the customer's team and help them create their vision, understand their issues, and guide them toward a solution that delivers a value-laden product in the shortest possible time at the least cost.

Grooming the Team for Success

This does not come from sitting at your desk working with spreadsheets. It comes from understanding the business' needs, the state of the deliverable, the team's capabilities, and the challenges of selling change.

Developing the customer's confidence and trust is the first step. A cohesive, agile, dynamic team is the primary ingredient in doing so. Integrate your teams with the customer, educate them on the customer's business, and immerse them in the customer's pain. This creates a responsive and customer-focused team. It reduces the tendency of teams to build products with the latest low-value gadgets.

Maintaining customer confidence is more difficult. This requires a culture and methodology that is adaptive. Too many times, draconian processes manage projects—methodologies that strive for operational excellence as opposed to product excellence. Granted, some customers (i.e., healthcare or military), require a thorough paper trail for every functional outcome, no matter how low its probability of occurrence. These are far from a majority of projects. Even in these projects, it is worth questioning the validity of the overhead and proposing new solutions.

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Averting Failure

Delivering a project's features and functions on time and within budget is incommensurate with a successful project and a happy customer. Dozens of environmental factors affect a project's value. Successful project managers carefully watch these factors and lead the customer through the process of discovery, defining appropriate changes that maximize their project's value. Losing sight of the project's value will inevitably result in failure.

Vision to Value

The project manager must first understand the vision. These include the lofty goals of the progenitor, which are rarely thought out in any logical manner as to how those goals could be executed and delivered. In many cases, the idea's applicability in the real world also lacks a touch of reality.

Turning vision into value takes equal parts of leadership and management. Understanding which parts to use is an art. Corporate leaders set the vision and define the organization's culture. If we do not imbue the qualities that build trust within our company and with our customers, growth will be elusive. Nowhere is this more evident than when your company's capabilities need to change and you start a corporate wide initiative. In these projects everyone must be aligned, communication and process is critical, yet you need to be innovative and push the envelope.

Nearly 30 years of dealing with companies large and small yield a few lessons on the balance one must achieve in reaching that new goal.

Managing Process and Attaining Compliance

Management is the easier task. We direct and we remain accountable. However, it limits our company's (not to mention our own) growth. Management is about applying processes, attaining compliance, and measuring performance against goals. Some key points to remember whether you are running a company or a project are:

Hire Expertise. Bringing in a person to fill a void is wrong. It is better to do without than to endorse mediocrity. Always hire the right people.

Apply Process. Process compliance is at the core of management. Properly applying process provides customers with consistency, never bureaucracy. Process stifles creativity. This is good; look what innovative accounting did over the last couple of decades.

Caution with Technology. Technology provides consistency and efficiency. Never apply it without first having the proper people and processes in place; otherwise, technology can create a bigger mess quicker and far more efficiently.

Manage the Goal. Define and manage scope, document decisions, and give the users what they need—question what they want.

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Mind the Constraints. Scope, schedule, and budget, pick two and only two. The project manager will tell you the third. Trying to edict all three is the definition of a failure waiting to happen.

Learn to Compromise. You will never reach perfection. You and your customer are going to have to compromise. It is incumbent upon you to train your team in the science and art of negotiation.

Building Innovative Cultures

Businesses that excel are innovative. So are their projects. Projects, by definition (a temporary endeavor to create a unique project or service) have to be innovative. This requires building a culture around leadership and self-direction.

Maintain Objectivity. Too many project managers are overly passionate about their projects. Rather than rooting for their project like high-school cheerleaders, they need to maintain objectivity. They must be passionately dispassionate and determine what to amplify and what to discard.

Foster Teams. Teams find answers. Learn from them. Talk to them. Work with them. Sponsor and support them. Communicate with them. However, never do the work for them. Leaders let others lead and support them when they stumble. Let people make mistakes so they can learn and grow. Management means **you** know how; leadership means **they** know how.

Forget Blame. A culture of blame is the fastest way to destroy morale, teamwork, and trust. It is an infectious disease that creates finger-pointing and secrets. Do not search for blame. Once you have found it, it will only give you fleeting pleasure. There is still a problem to fix.

Heed Denial. Before any problem can be addressed, you have to first admit it exists. An open culture devoid of blame, which asks for help, and is open to learning, will avoid nearly every catastrophic failure. It is an integral part of any innovative culture.

Focus on Data. Relying on data and avoiding analysis paralysis is the foundation of good decisions.   Numbers are truthful little bastards, squeeze them hard enough and they will tell you the truth. They cannot lie; it is integral to their job.

Turn Vision into Value

New strategies mean new business capabilities which beget projects. That is how companies grow and survive. Time to market relies on your company's ability to run projects efficiently and deliver results in the shortest possible time allowing you to achieve your desired ROI. These eleven traits help build a lean culture focused on speed of execution. They will continue to be your focus; the challenge being establishing them throughout your organization. As the leader you must continually adjust and apply the right mixture of innovation and process. The right balancing of leadership and management will grow your people, your company, and your profits.

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Projects Need Leadership, Not Management

It starts with leadership. Too many project managers spend their time trying to manage their customer. Trying to use directives (management's primary tool) on a customer is infinitely more difficult than leading them through the process of discovery and letting them see the faults in their plans. This is no more evident than when the role of a project manager is seen without its leadership component.

"Project management is easy. We have been managing people for hundreds of years. Just take any manager, give them a project, and tell them to get it done." Experienced project managers will accurately predict the end of this story—there is a disproportionate chance this project will fail. Rather than "manager" being the operative noun, a leader is required to deliver project value on time and within budget. To distinguish the project manager further—functional managers need only manage subordinates (which they have authority over) , while successful project managers lead extended project teams that include their managers, customers, and stakeholders (over whom they have no authority). This fundamental difference drastically increases the project manager's scope of responsibility and need to lead, since the project team includes an entire flock of stakeholders.

The Project Manager's Purview

Functional managers are primarily responsible for their direct reports—the classical organization chart. On regular occasions, they coordinate with their peers or a boss, but their focus is on their staff. Project managers, on the other hand, must align a much larger array of people. Besides their project team and peers, they have an entire organization chart above them consisting of the project's stakeholders. In actuality, this loosely knit collection could be a significantly larger population than their well-organized subordinate project team.

Where I currently live, outside Portland, Oregon, USA, there has been a twenty-year long effort to build a new bridge across the Columbia River. The two, currently steel, structures, one constructed in 1917 and the other in 1958, were built long before seismic design and construction techniques entered into the mainstream. They are arguably the weakest link in the 1400-mile long freeway and only draw-bridges in the interstate highway that traverses Washington, Oregon, and California. There is a legitimate concern about their ability to sustain a reasonably sized tremblor. Without a doubt, it will be a massive project building this multimodal, dual-decked, mile-long bridge. It will take thousands of designers, managers, and construction workers. However, consider the stakeholders involved. They include: the federal transportation agencies, the US military (a reserve airbase is nearby), the Coast Guard, two state and two city governments, two transit agencies, light-rail proponents and opponents, bicyclists, pedestrians, local toll-paying citizenry, state tax payers (many hundreds of miles away wondering why they need to pay anything), boaters, businesses, truckers, commuters, environmentalists, and Native Americans, just to name a few. All have special interests; all can muck up the best project plan. Few of them know anything about project management; none of them care about the woes of the project manager. Without a doubt, the project manager will need to navigate more obstacles from the stakeholders than from the team actually building the bridge.

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Training Superiors and Stakeholders

Your projects may be much smaller, but they still need project managers that can lead without authority and can train leaders and stakeholders who are ignorant of their project management deficiencies. Never expect executives and sponsors to know what project managers need to properly execute their jobs. It is paramount that project managers use these people as tools to get the project completed, which means training them on their jobs. Project managers must unapologetically assign them tasks just like everyone else on the project. They work for the project manager. The sooner everyone realizes this, the better the project will run.

To underscore the point, think back on the last few sponsors you saw assigned to projects. Did they want to be in that role? Had they done the job before? Did they ask for reports on progress or did they request assignments to help the project? Too often, projects inherit project sponsors as an afterthought—assigned under duress. Sponsors need the project manager's help in delineating what is required of them to make the project successful. This includes clarifying and constraining the project's scope, acquiring subject matter experts, finding the extra money when it is obvious that the project is bigger than anyone thought.

The executives? They should be mentoring project managers, helping with costs, and cutting through the politics. If they are not doing this, the project manager must teach them to do so. Most likely, the project team members understand their project roles; I doubt the leaders and stakeholders do.

Delegating Up

Of course, a project managers' job is to run the project; however, if they are confounded by a problem, it is better to ask for guidance than to flail and fail.

A few years ago, I was called in to fix a project that was going to be 200% over budget and schedule. Yes, 200%. That means three times the cost and three times as long. Sad, but true! The product would benefit two departments; only one was funding it. My investigation showed that nearly all of the problems were "above" the project in the management hierarchy. The leadership was dysfunctional. A Vice President for the non-funding department requested that one of the project's team members blind-copy her on all emails and communications regarding scope. The VP would then use this information to have her team bias the requirements in her department's favor. Upon discovering this, I bundled up the evidence and trudged into her boss' office—an executive three layers above me in the organization and second-in-command for the multi-billion dollar company. I made my case in a logical and dispassionate manner asking him to stop the covert action. By the time I returned to my desk (three blocks from the executive's office), the reverberations had hit the project team, with a memo reprimanding the use of the blind copy feature. He took care of the situation as I left his office. He wanted to help, he was unaware of the problem, and when he became aware, helped me regain command and control over my project by removing the meddling manager. Less than a month later, I had to invoke the assistance of another executive, this time the VP of Information Technology, asking him to stop the drone of negativism from one manager regarding my recovered project's team. The offender apologized for hindering our progress. Executives want to help; we simply need us to tell them what to do.

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Success is Contagious

Stepping up and being a leader, helps you, your peers, and the entire organization. Leadership begets success and success is contagious. Peers mimic the victories. Your actions will improve the company's culture and the change sticks because everyone benefits. The value is evident in what you do and in your project's deliverable. Change that people understand (both logically and emotionally) does not meet the same apathetic demise of other change efforts. It only requires that you focus on six directives:

Leading your team mates
- What do you need from me?
- What's in your way?
- How can I help?

Leading your leaders:
- I need you to help me by...
- I need mentoring on ...
- I need you to clarify...

Leadership and Attitude

Leading leaders is not easy. Some say it is like pushing string. I understand the metaphor, but it makes me think the people saying it are stuck looking at the problem wrong. The problem is the predisposition to the inevitability of the issue—there is no reason to look for a solution because it is out of our control. Worse than that, we are so defeated that we rarely ask the question "Why are we trying to push that string?"

The C-Suite's Offhand Request

This is never more evident than when orders come down from senior executives. Someone in the executive team mentions to his or her direct reports that a new widget would be nice and, within minutes, the entire organization is realigned to complete the new widget to please Ms. or Mr. C-Suite. Middle management overlooks the alternative of asking some simple validating questions to confirm priorities. Rather than probing and explaining the impact of executing the new request, all other tasks become subordinate and everyone's schedules are re-planned to the new precedence.

Leading Your Leaders

The source of this problem lies at the feet of the executives. They are the ones that set the tone and create a culture that is reactionary to their requests and stifles the subordinate's ability to question and set priorities. In these cultures, middle managers spend an inordinate amount of time guessing how to please their bosses at the price of getting the company's work done.

At this point, many would resign to throwing their hands up in despair, surrendering to the notion that management is all fouled up. My approach is to "push a little string." Executives do not

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have an exclusive right to leadership. Leadership is a trait that all of us should be honing—regardless of our organization's culture. All these situations need is a little upward leading. Here are some rules to follow:

Be passionately dispassionate. Objectivity is paramount. Passion is what everyone says they want, but when you are solving a problem, where emotions flare, stick to the facts. Make sure the pros and cons are objectively laid out in a logical manner to make a decision.

Explain the problem. As so elegantly said by NASA's Mr. Wayne Hale, "remember that your leaders are not very smart." [ix] Assuming your leaders know the detail, or even the subject, of the issue you are addressing is a fatal mistake. You know every intimate detail of what you and your team are working on; your leaders do not, nor should they. They need the problem explained in concise, high-level, decision-making terms so they can give informed direction.

Tell your leaders how to solve the problem. Always have two or three viable solutions to the problems you escalate. Their job is to make decisions rather than figuring out all the workable solutions. They hired you to come up with the options.

Ask your leaders for clarification and mentoring. If you and your team are having trouble establishing a set of practical solutions, ask for guidance. Although your leaders are often far from the technical aspects of your job, they once were doing what you are now, maybe with a typewriter, but they were there. They have a wealth of experience. Remember the adage, "Old age and treachery will out maneuver youth and skill."

The Right Problem Gets The Right Solution

The challenge is not pushing string. The challenge is looking past the obstacles and biases and creating new methods to address them. What may seem impossible is only that way since we framed it incorrectly. Change the frame of reference and we can create new innovative solutions. In the case in point, deliberately taking steps to adopt the traits of a good leader, rather than sticking with those of a follower, will calm the seemingly knee-jerk reactions of lame leadership.

The Art of No

As said before, creating value is not about giving customers what they want—it is about giving them what they need. This requires making tough decisions, producing minimally viable products, testing the premise the product was based on, and learning how to limit scope. Leaders are masters at saying no.

Maybe a story will help. The meeting was in a posh Montreal hotel conference room, two customers on one side of the table, and the client and me on the other. Taped to the back of my laptop lid was a conference-center supplied piece of paper with a hastily scrawled note on it. The entire message consisted of only two letters followed an exclamation mark. The letters were "N" and "O." They sent a succinct message that was hard to ignore as the customer incessantly strove to get a little more functionality brought into the failing project's scope. For

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every request, I would drop my chin slightly, look over the top of my glasses, tap my right index finger on the top of my laptop, and they would relent. Instead of being a pessimistic curmudgeon, I was bringing realism about the budget and timeline and doing what leaders do—making hard decisions.

The Yes Culture

There are certainly more polite ways to deny a request; however, this project would be millions of dollars over budget even with my incessant perfunctory reply. Everyone knew that we had to make tough decisions or failure—in the form of cancellation—would be laid upon all of us. Therefore, for three days, we jocularly heeded the sign's advice.

We have become soft. We have created a culture that is rife with the positive. Look no further than how we build estimates. Regardless of the task, we plentifully pad our approximations. We carefully define the effort to complete the assignment and then factor in "contingency." An eloquent word for "slop," which is a term from the old-days for extra time inserted into schedules for unknowns and unrelated undertakings. Those were the days before our culture considered multitasking more valuable than focus. I long to return to those days… or at least the prudent philosophy. We would be far more productive. Instead, we push more time into assignments anticipating the boss' email, phone call, or abrupt presence in your cubicle with a new-must-be-done-right-now request for averting some immediate catastrophe. All of us, being the recipient of thousands of these demands, know too well that the world will keep spinning if we refuse the request.

The Love-Fest

However, with the superior's appeal comes the love-fest. You are prepared. Having anticipated your boss' action, you have padded your timeline and, with a comforting smile, you reply, "Yes." Your boss' shoulders drop, he or she exhales a relieved sigh, followed by a faintly auditable "Good" (the great boss says "thank you," but do not get your expectations too high). Everyone is happy as the affirmative report reverberates up the chain of command. A warm, fuzzy feeling overtakes people much like the fairytale trailer "they lived happily ever after." It nauseates leaders.

The result is that all tasks become tardier simply because of management's inability to prioritize. Prioritization: the one action that provides the ammunition to decline the request. The predictable result of multitasking is always the same—everything becomes late.

No is Good

Refusing to comply with the request can be much more tactful than hanging a negatory note on your cubicle wall. It starts with each one of us denying the opportunity by eliminating pad from our estimates. Eradicating "slop" makes it impossible to use and you can rightfully decline requests with a simple "No, I would, but I am busy getting this task done. If I work on your task, this one will be late. Sorry. However, if you get approval for me to be late on this task, then I can help you." This puts the requestor in the position of validating priorities. Never, assume he or she knows what you are working on and how important it is. Taskmasters have the fiduciary responsibility of validating the reassignment; however, that takes work. Discovering conflicting

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priorities, places them in a position of saying "no" to the original requestor. My advice: put your current assignments first and if the new request is really that important, your task will be given the grace required. Your ability to deliver on time and as promised will erase any overtones of not being a team player.

Practice Saying No

The advice is easy; however, the words are hard. Leaders must learn to say no. Our culture is so brainwashed to the positive that we have lost the ability to decline requests. Change that by taking a proactive approach and reading the recommendations of an assertiveness coach. The advice is simple—be direct. Just as shown above, the first word should be "No." Being less direct confuses the communication. Inform them of the actions they should take to attain an affirmative answer and ensure they understand the consequences of changing your priorities.

Conclusion

As shown in the opening example on the Hubble Space Telescope, value is the measurement of a project's success. Tools help ensure a project strives toward value; however, leadership, focus on strategic goals, and communication, and communication are the attributes that makes it happen. Tracking scope, schedule, and budget is insufficient. Two challenges exist, often impeding progress delivering value are:

1. Project managers driving to employ those traits while in the headlong battle to get their project done.

2. Executives maintaining a current, concise, and coherent strategy and empowering project managers to execute it.

Leadership throughout the organization is paramount in creating success. Focusing on the high impact areas such as leading up, leading the customer to what they need rather then what they want, politely saying no, ensuring your project accounts for change management, and focusing on value are critical to move from the current dismal success rates to the norm of success.

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A strong comprehensive strategic foundation coupled with operational excellence allows companies to build the capabilities to thrive. This is Todd Williams' approach to helping companies succeed. Utilizing over twenty-five years of experience he helps companies turn their vision into value by executing initiatives successfully.

Following his mantra, "Strategy, People, Process, and then Technology," he specializes in rescuing projects and helping organizations build the infrastructure to prevent future failures.

His international experience, working with executives and multicultural teams has earned him a reputation as someone that can come into any situation and address issues. Captured in his book *Rescue the Problem Project*, he defines a project audit and recovery process for rescuing red projects that focuses on the role of people in projects, root cause correction, and failure prevention.

He also writes for The CEO Magazine, American Management Association Playbook blog, his own *Back From Red* blog, and numerous other outlets. Periodicals, including Fortune/CNN Money, CIO Update, ZDNet, Enterprising CIO, and IT Business Edge routinely, ask for his opinion on critical issues facing today's business leaders.
He is also an internationally acclaimed speaker doing over 30 presentations and workshops a year throughout the United States, Canada, and European Union.

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