

Collective Resolve - Conduct that tackles failures of productivity and growth ¹

Martin Price

Introduction

Delay and uncertainty regularly interrupt the progress of an enterprise; large and small. All rests on the players' continual planning as well as their response to unanticipated events. Any new course of action needs to recognise new approaches, vested interests and the players' conduct. Their own 'mix of minds' (see below) is a principal asset that is typically squandered. Such neglect amounts to serious weakness.

Very few organisations adopt a working practice known as 'Collective Resolve' despite its application in celebrated successes. The prospect for most UK organisations applying Collective Resolve is however very limited. The article reveals why this is.

Project players can function together extraordinarily well through Collective Resolve. It is an arrangement enabled by the close engagement of players, their joint working, high expectations and thoroughness. When groups work interactively and with synergy, outstanding performance and speed can be achieved. Such working arrangements have made a leading contribution to energising the Japanese economy and others across SE Asia over the last 40 years.

Business at the leading edge

The quest for innovation and smart decision-making has in the past been the role of a few. However, in recent times in managing change, leaders have come to engage with a wider range of players. They have become more inclusive in their decision-making: firms involve further interests and employees in managing, governments seek the views of the electorate and football sides turn increasingly to team play.

The demands and complexity of circumstances today call for greater diligence and the closer involvement of all stakeholders. We learn from the leader of the GCHQ's Event Management Centre, that in responding to a complex cyber-attack, they form a project as a 'mix of minds' – a group of disparate specialist code breakers that include those psychologically disposed to novel, rapid and creative thinking. Together they seek imaginative ways of thinking and interacting. (Ref. The BBC Today programme Guest Editor 29/12/2022). Evidently, the players' vigour, lateral thinking, diversity of approach and imagination are recognised to be crucial to the group's success.

¹ How to cite this article: Price, M. (2023). Collective Resolve - Conduct that tackles failures of productivity and growth, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue IV, April.

We are left to ponder how GCHQ then deploys this ‘mix of minds’ for the work required to reach a useful outcome. Success depends on players’ conduct collectively, as well as the conduct of individuals.

There are no universal formulae for managing an enterprise, although there are many tools and techniques available to assist. Progress is made from the interpretation, ingenuity and tenacity of the Key Players - those that bring the greatest contribution to conduct and decision-making.

The Role of Key Players

Key Players steer the course of a project. In accommodating its circumstances and uncertainties, continual re-thinking and the re-direction required. Key Players do not restrict themselves to orderly procedures: rather they share together the quest to discover productive arguments and their resolution. Direction lies in the aggregation of the Key Players’ comprehension, determining direction, progress and expediency.

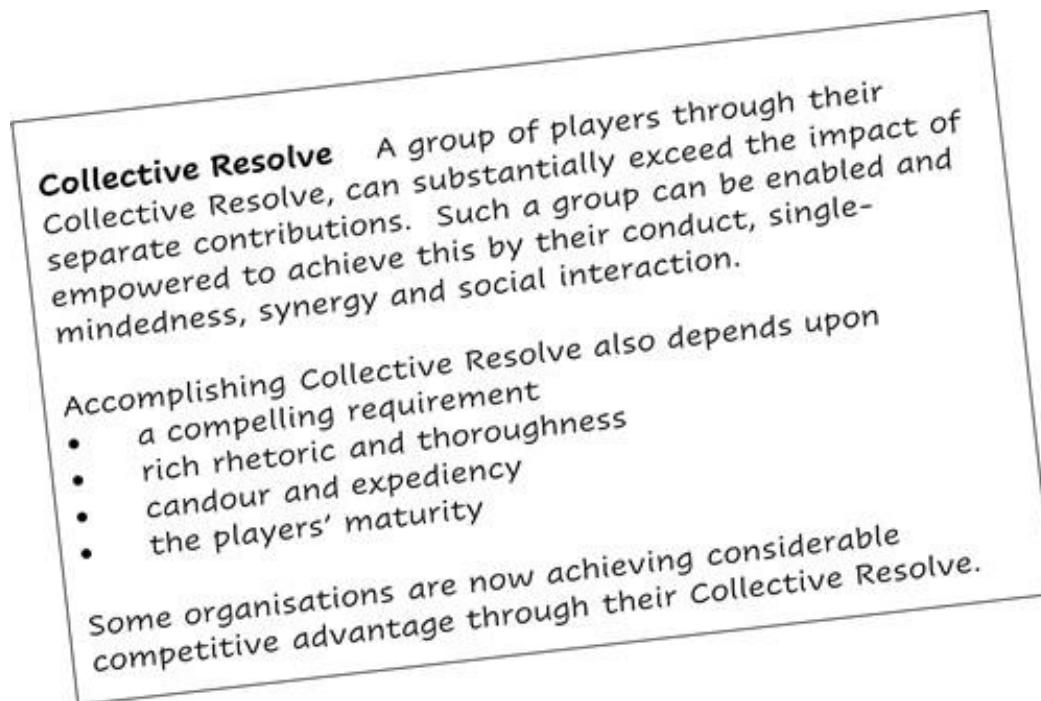
The Key Players in their inimitable way, will together decide a project’s course of action. They seek collectively to explain, make connections, problem-solve, imagine, question, reflect, listen, participate, argue, plan, collaborate, negotiate deliberate and scurry, while strengthening their dialogue with rhetoric and Collective Resolve.

Who are the Key Players? Some Key Players are in leadership or customer roles while others act as functionaries or in serving interests from the wider stakeholder community. Key Players acquire their standing from the value of their contributions as these are perceived across the enterprise. It is they who shape the project, its development and direction.

Long-standing organisations tend to develop local patterns and relationships. What can be called a ‘regime’ sometimes emerges in an enterprise, expressing its traditions, culture assumptions, attitudes and preferences. An organisation’s conduct and direction are set by the Key Players in response to circumstances as these arise.

Organisational behaviour has a profound impact on a project’s commitment, pace and capability. Collective Resolve must not be confused with individual player’s responses, however many of them there may be. “*Diversity trumps ability!*” In his book ‘The Difference’, Scott E Page shows how the collective wisdom of a group exceeds the sum of its parts. The key to optimising efficiency in a group lies in its diversity rather than the outward appearance of its members. Whatever the methodology adopted, the conduct of Key Players remains the pre-eminent agency.

Collective Resolve can be practiced by any organisation that is able to work in close collaboration and is single-minded. It can bring inestimable high value, but as of today, examples remain exceptional. Collective Resolve can often be attributed to the culture of an organisation.



Contemporary examples of Collective Resolve include

- Astra Zeneca's deployment of the Covid 19 vaccine,
- Toyota's use of Kaizen (continuous improvement)
- application of the 'mix of minds' at GCHQ (as above)
- South Korea's success in leading the global telecom market
- the Lions' mission to promote UK women's football
- the UK TV programme DIY SOS.

The essential conduct of project players

The project management professional community and its institutions promote the idea that success depends on the methodology, structure, methods, skills, tools and techniques employed. A crucial feature that is frequently overlooked is the conduct and organisation of the players – reaching a peak through Collective Resolve.

An enterprise progresses through human and social endeavour undertaken through its players' structures, but also in its commitment, engagement, thinking, reasoning, dialogue and ingenuity. What is to be done and how it is to be done relies on their creativity and conduct, striving to function as a combined entity.

Eighteen types of conduct are listed below in an attempt to map those having the greatest impact on the success of an enterprise. They are drawn from the experience of a practicing professional and are revealed by the attention given in an organisation to their conduct that secures effective Engagement, Discipline and Process.

These form a platform on which Collective Resolve relies to develop and be sustained. A ‘thumbnail’ attached to each conduct listed below, seeks to capture their meaning and to highlight their contribution to the quality of management.

ENGAGEMENT CONDUCT

1. Constructive Dialogue. Achieving goals and outcomes is the primary purpose of all players. Dialogue and the pursuit of clarification through conversation and other forms of engagement are paramount. Players need to be determined, authentic, collaborative, persistent and practise appreciative enquiry.

Players should be expected to attend closely and to set aside their personal interests and opinion. When using social media there is the risk of a shortfall in detail and rapport and this can undermine the shared comprehension of complex issues.

2. Compelling Argument. Choices are fundamental to managing and depend on players’ close and concerted attention. The quality of an organisation’s decision-making depends on its players sharing information, exploring ideas, language and scrutiny.

A useful argument relies on the players’ experience, imagination, listening, tolerance, rhetoric and professional maturity. An enterprise needs to be seeded with players willing and able to lead discussion rationally and coherently. Close social engagement makes opportunity for ingenuity. Avoidance of argument increases the risks of error.

Argument is conducted well when players meet face to face. Using written exchanges only can be additionally demanding and is less reliable. When a situation calls for group discussion, face-to-face meetings are more likely to reveal attitudes and feelings and to reveal richer meaning.

3. Decisive Response. Hesitation, delay and indecision threaten pace and progress. Sometimes these disturbances result from the practical constraints of re-work, changes to priorities, resource shortage or technical problems. However, indecision can arise from dithering. This can be the result of ambiguity, misunderstanding, fruitless dialogue, weak argument, a shortfall in courage or shortcomings in a player’s supervision.

4. Customary Courtesy. This can serve to safely win attention and be a social lubricant. It facilitates communication, whether face to face or in writing and raises confidence. In most social situations, politeness costs nothing and gains everything. Gestures that convey respect help to carry candour and sincerity. Overdone, the practice can however be seen as patronising.

5. Sincere Candour and Trust. When an organisation can achieve regular candour through people’s openness and honesty, intention will reign. Candour is particularly effective in an intervention seen to be absent of prejudice. Candour can unlock dialogue when exchanges are bland or clouded. Like courtesy, candour can act as a catalyst for promoting an alternative course of action.

Enterprise relies on the existence a broad church. Players need to observe formalities and structures while at the same time being open to alternatives. Much depends on players' winning the trust that enables candour. Trust relies on a team's capability as well as on personal integrity.

6. Rapport. This also enables players to act together to discover opportunity through social engagement. It develops from a continual search for authenticity and common interest. Rapport becomes strengthened through the sharing of learning experiences, respect for the views of others and the shared pursuit of understanding.

DISCIPLINE CONDUCT

1. Clear-cut Goals. Success relies on all players being continually aware of goals and their changes. Each require the revised plan to be promptly shared and implemented. Failure to adapt quickly brings confusion and risk.

2. All-player Leadership. An organisation's hierarchy serves to assign general responsibilities. Sometimes however circumstances need immediate attention and players need to collaborate together in leading the way forward. Integrity is important and players should never see themselves to be immune from their obligations as a team member.

Filling senior positions in challenging projects in the public sector has sometimes been resolved by the awkward practice of appointing an independent consultant to a role – as a means of protecting employed staff and their careers. This way, damage to the organisation can be the greater risk.

3. Sustaining enterprise. An organisation has to respond to the demands of a range of stakeholders – e.g., seniors, other functions, regulators, partners, customers and resource holders. Sometimes an initiative needs to exercise its own virtual authority.

4. Corporate adaptation. Products and services now commonly have shorter lives and lead-times, requiring an organisation to adapt more quickly and responsively. Many businesses and public sector organisations are habituated to closely control their business processes and find adaptation to be especially challenging. Here, an orientation to include project working can be useful.

5. Cultural or Circumstantial Distinction. An enterprise may be obliged to respond to overriding factors. For example, the practice of Kaizen from Japanese philosophy can be cited as a cultural factor, while the pursuit of an urgent international medical need as circumstantial.

Other circumstantial distinctions apply in

- Military situations
- Life and death situations
- Corporate requirements
- Legal requirements

- Religious practices
- Economic policy

6 Lateral Thinking. This is an approach that can be used where more resolute and open discussion is needed to address unfamiliar issues. Enterprise is always unique and sometime needs additional originality. Competition, goal changes, improvement, re-work, workarounds, shortened lead-times and cost reduction depend on players' enquiry and imagination. While some people are able to think laterally, there may require some help to liberate greater possibilities.

There are occasions when players recognise the need to plan more imaginatively or to address a particularly unfamiliar or challenging issues. Various approaches can be deployed for this that include -

- the use of a disinterested facilitator
- widening the conversation by the inclusion of players from the wider organisation or a fresh mind from outside
- brainstorming

PROCESS CONDUCT

1. Adaptive Methodology. A methodology is an arrangement of methods that help to order a particular type of enterprise. It provides a framework of stages e.g., scoping, planning, scheduling, implementing, controlling, etc.

In software development projects, re-direction can be a recurrent feature. In what is known as 'Agile'. Small cross-functional self-organising teams advance through task iterations as they learn and revise: responding to a customer's regular revisions.

A development requires continual adaptation by its players as requirements, opportunities and constraints change. A methodology can be regarded as a process strategy.

2. Winning Rhetoric. Comprehension, consensus and collaboration are crucial to the players' engagement. They rely on the sharing of information, but also on their capacity to articulate meaning, options and to shape opinion. Credibility, reason and values are the basis of rhetoric, an important feature of the dialogue in an enterprise.

3. Systematic Re-direction. Adaptation needs to be carefully orchestrated. Re-stating goals, discovering options, revisiting the plan, sharing this with all the players and resolving the inevitable disorder are requirements.

4. Critical Oversight. When working repeatedly as a group, members can develop allegiance to earlier choices. This behaviour can restrict new ideas and innovation. To stimulate fresh thinking a very successful manufacturer of vacuum cleaners, for this reason, deliberately re-deploys players between projects for its own sake. Some organisations deploy senior and disinterested professionals as neutral observers.

5. Political Acumen. Relationships, motives and ambitions can undermine due process and the resolution of political challenges may not be straight-forward. Players need to acquire the ability to resolve matters using their resolve, experience, observations and discussion with trusted colleagues. Political acumen requires situational knowledge across the range of diverse landscapes.

6. Enterprise Pacing. Players seek to avoid delay and at the same time, they look to ensure the quality of managing strong outcomes. Continuous attention is required to strike the right balance between these two factors to maximise pace and quality.

As a pathway for performance improvement, Collective Resolve offers a particular way of undertaking the management of an enterprise. The insert on page 2 summarises the arrangements that apply. A professional development path now needs to open for Collective Resolve, with its attention to player's conduct becoming common practice.

There are three primary conditions to be met when beginning to overhaul the performance and productivity of an enterprise:

- adapt to strengthen engagement, discipline and process
- aggregate the contributions of the Key Players
- mobilise the organisation's Collective Resolve.

About the Author



Martin Price

United Kingdom



Martin Price is widely known as a speaker and writer and for his fresh ideas on human and organisational behaviour so crucial to the success of managing a project. He was Director of Professional Development for PMIs UK Chapter and for six years hosted PMIs monthly UK Chapter meetings in London.

Martin worked as an electrical engineer before spending 15 years as a personnel manager and then as a change management consultant with PA Consulting Group. There he enabled and supported the transformation of large and small businesses.

He is MD of EngagementWorks, a consultancy supporting organisations in their quest for developing high performing project organisations. He is the author of the book “The Single-Minded Project.”

Based in Northampton, UK, Martin can be contacted at mprice@engagementworks.com. For more information or to follow Martin, visit www.engagementworks.com.