
Cracking the Excellence Code¹

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Introduction

Historically, most project management textbooks defined excellence as a continuous stream of successfully managed projects. Many of the definitions of excellence focused more so on how the contractors used the tools and techniques of project and program management rather than the impact on the customers and stakeholders. Articles have been written discussing how work breakdown structures, statements of work, and capturing best practices lead to excellence.

Today we realize that there are many components of excellence. Excellence is now being defined in business as well as behavioral terms. Behavioral excellence has become a much more critical component than in the past because of AI. Excellence is not just in implementing the tools and techniques effectively, but also in understanding the true value of project management as seen by customers and stakeholders.

Excellence organizationally and personally is now a journey. In the context of project management, going on that journey has been changing overtime and especially fast in the last few years. The mega technology disruptions have contributed to the change and the recent potentially positive scaling with generative AI is no exception.

In this article we will tackle a few elements pertaining to the changing views and approaches to excellence in delivering the promises of projects and programs and question some of the traditional views of leading and driving teamwork in this digital age. We would like to crack the code on how excellence has changed over time and what future leaders would need to equip themselves with as part of their new expanded toolbox.

Excellence in project delivery has usually been tied to consistency in utilization of certain practices and supporting behaviors time and again. This is not enough in the future as the patterns and the ways of working will continue to change at a fast pace and what might be a best practice today might be challenged as the project team goes to work in

¹ How to cite this paper: Kerzner, H. and Zeitoun, A. (2023). Cracking the Excellence Code, The Great Project Management Accelerator, series article, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue XI, November.

the morning. This intense level of adaptability is empowered by technology and the merging of the virtual and real worlds has become the norm. Technology is changing not only the content of the project management forms, guidelines, templates, and checklists we are using today, but how they will be used in the future. Simply stated, technology is helping us understand the true value of excellence in project management.

The AI-Enabled Future

Even though, the hot topic of AI, based on large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, is gaining major attention, the concept of AI itself was first proposed by British mathematician, Alan Turing, in his 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence". We reached a state where the educating of AI that we achieved, coupled with the massive amount and higher quality of data, got us to a point of impact creation on initiatives delivery that is meaningful and disruptive.

To support the future of project management and the new ways of achieving excellence, AI-enabled project work:

- Creates efficiencies that were not possible previously
- Levels the playing field where the basics of planning and executing projects can easily and quickly be covered
- Expedites the onboarding of project teams to get them to performing faster and more smoothly
- Creates a heavy focus on understanding the customer's definition of project business value
- Enhances the quality of decision-making and turn the supporting processes to a highly data-driven approach
- Opens the door for new skills and roles for the project managers and teams of the future

The Future belongs to Empathetic Leaders

There are both concerns and equally high levels of excitement about the future of achieving excellence. This same concern is a main point of discussion around AI. Although the future is highly digital, it is also highly human. The human of the future though is a departure from today's human. Empathy is at the center of that person. With

data comes responsibility. This starts from the prompts that are used in interacting with AI-enabled chatbots to sensing the true and meaningful takeaways from the outputs of that interaction with the machine.

Humans and future leaders need to differentiate themselves with the power of relating and collaborating differently, not only amongst team members, but with all stakeholders as well. Social leadership will become the norm and the ability of the leader to further humble his/her self is increasingly becoming more critical. It is not about the leader or the classic ways of operating, yet it is about the team and the future delivery mode called projects. The upside of AI is the time. Time that leaders can spend in understanding and relating to key initiatives' stakeholders. Time that leaders can spend building partnerships and alliances, and forging ecosystems for experimentation and furthering adaptability capacity.

Your future role is shaping to be a **true empathetic connector**. Your role will continue to be a barriers breaker and a mindset shaper, where the teams are free to innovate, create, and focus on further enhancements to delivery outcomes. Embracing the changing ways of achieving excellence is also largely a behavioral change, as it requires a departure from the comfort zones where the focus of traditional leaders has typically resided.

Future leaders are empathetic connectors.

Purpose Linked to Customer and Strategy _____

Describing future excellence requires a tight **balance between purpose, the customer, and the strategy**. This clarity is likely to be extracted from the fast access to data and should give the space to dedicate more focus on the rational and purpose behind many of the future initiatives. This tended to be a key missing link for the success of programs and projects and this it is a great value-add. This new view of excellence and the approach of achieving it, also puts the customer much closer to the center of these change initiatives. When this is coupled with a tight alignment with strategy, the delivery is effortless and the teams are consistently highly motivated and capable of sustaining that excellence journey.

The ingredients of this future view of excellence are:

- Purpose that is inspiring and clear so that project teams are energized to deliver on the initiatives
- Customer empathy that capitalizes on a more effective utilization of data to create a differentiated customer experience
- A strategy that is clearly articulated and is built on quality data that enables better choices which are closely linked to achieving customer value
- A heavy focus on how the customer defines value and understanding the customer's components that create the value

Breaking Down the Barriers to Excellence

An important analogy that relates to this changing view of excellence is the focus on breaking barriers like the ones that continue to exist across organizations in this digital world. Figure.1 highlights how a future excellence that is coupled with enhanced use of technology and capitalizing on the power of AI, could change the dynamics of how leaders and their teams work in the future.

Program and project leaders can focus on 4 supporting building blocks to achieve excellence. The first block is the enhanced questioning power. The high access to quality data gives the space for practicing quality questions that are specific, have proper context, and that open the door to understanding the possible complexity in a given initiative. The second building block, focusing on thinking, is one of the most valuable aspects of technological disruptions where we could have copilots and the many other upcoming advances, free up the time that we could block on our calendars to think away from the busy projects noise, and thus become more strategic.

This is also where we could then scale the amount of experimenting that the third block covers. It is about creating a knowledge-powered engine where continual learning from experimenting becomes the norm for achieving future excellence. The fourth and final building block, delivering, then starts taking on a different style as the linkages to strategy and purpose increase, while keeping the customer highly engaged in the journey to achieving aspired outcomes.

While all these blocks are important, delivery may be the most challenging. Keeping customers highly engaged may create issues if the customers are unfamiliar with the new technology being used on their projects or are resistant to the use of new concepts. Eventually there will be alignment, but this may take time and require educating customers on new technologies and ways of working.

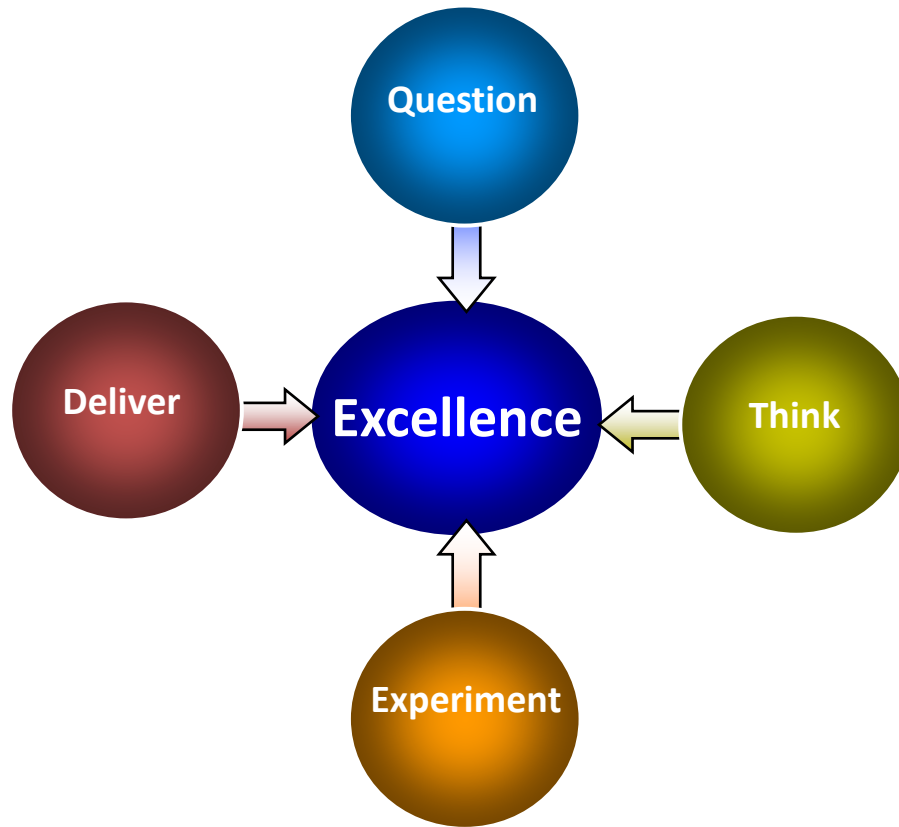


Figure 1. The Future Excellence Building Block

THE PATH FORWARD

Shifts in how excellence is defined and achieved and even what it means in the future are continuously changing. Being focused on delivery excellence, in the form of projects and programs, the technological innovations around us and the attention to innovating the way we work and where we spend our time, will directly contribute to our ability to lead with impact into the future. Customers are expected to have an input into the definition of excellence and the relationship with the customer's definition of project management value creation. Most organizations are seeking to get the value AI is capable to contribute to their ability to execute on their strategic agenda. The path forward requires a different risk appetite and boldness in decision-making. It also

assumes that we capitalize on high physiological safety to achieve that boldness in decisions and for scaling at speed.

Excellence in the future also means that sustainability is not just an added word to the strategy or strategic plan, but a true focus of where resources and time are being spent. Project and program leaders are expected to be the right hand to the executive leadership teams of future organizations in order to create the space for faster and more innovative processes and products. This is another way the *Next Gen* of program/project leaders would take the helm of driving the most impactful future transformational changes.

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Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.

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- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.
 - The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
 - The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
 - The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
 - Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
 - The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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Dr. Al Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his

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In his current role with Siemens, he is a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Masterplan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation portfolio processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at zeitounstrategy@gmail.com