

LEVEL 5 PROJECT MANAGER

A JOURNEY TO GREATNESS

Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed they are incredibly ambitious – but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.

Jim Collins - Good to Great

The essence of level 5 leadership

Which ambitions for the project manager?

Prior embarking in any strategic project, election of the project manager (PM) is a critical step. In most cases she is selected based on her previous assignments, organization knowledge, leading capability, and potentially her level of expertise in project management.

The selected PM tends to accept the position for several reasons: having a new experience in her resume, enabling the access to a higher position, or "I do not have something else to do". Here is certainly where resides the problem. She will focus on the completion on time, on cost of the project and might try to appear as the leader who makes the project successful.

The essence of L5 leadership conveys success way after the finalization of a project, and implies a focus on the future organization's performance rather than on short term objective of implementation. When selecting the PM, an organization should identify individual who will care about the future outcome and the one who goes beyond personal renown as an element of her motivation.

A pressure to manage

Managing the level of expectations

Jim Collins' article in the Wall Street Journal "High Returns Amid Low Expectations" highlighted "How sky-high expectations become the seeds of decline." The fact that an organization is expecting a lot from a project creates extraordinary pressure, especially in terms of time, which might drive to some spectacular actions to show that the project will be delivered at D-Date.

That is the role of the PM to tune down some of the expectations of senior management and don't let the panic impact the ultimate deliverable of the project, which is – improved organizational performance. We should heed the case of ATT CEO, Michael Armstrong in the late 90s, as a key lesson learned.

Several years ago, Jim Collins published "Good to Great - Why some companies make the leap... and others don't", highlighting key characteristics of successful businesses. The following paper explores the application of Collins' core principles & concepts in the discipline of Project Management.

The first concept raised in his book is «Level 5 Leadership» and represents the cornerstone of the entire approach.

The focus on team's commitment

Ambiguity of controls

Jim Collins argues that if you assemble a team with the same core values and core purpose and you give them the freedom of choice along with some commitment mechanisms, the level of controls required to operate should be minimum. Temptation to micro control a project is always present, especially because there are great tools to do so out there. However relying on a strong team commitment will free up the execution of some cumbersome reporting mechanisms. The level 5 leader knows how to balance these controls and develop the commitment of the entire team. As a rule of thumb "If you want to control your project, focus on the team commitment". Again like the PM, it all starts by "Putting the right people on the Bus".

A central practice to the team

Learning as a key performance driver

I'm always baffled by the amount of opportunities missed in a project because some information are not shared on time, not shared at all, or not easily accessible by the entire team. When assembling the team, people are selected for their expertise, and they will act in the project as knowers not as learners. But here is a great opportunity to learn even more by people who will be exposed to their expertise. It is important whilst kicking off the project, to understand the learning goals of every player, and make learning a central practice to the team. For instance a weekly meeting to share the team learning could create opportunities to avoid wrong decisions and accelerate the overall planning.

An inverse relationship

Leadership versus power

One of the key findings of «Good to Great» is that there is an inverse relationship between "Exercising Power and Exercising Leadership". Project Management is the ideal place to practice Level 5 leadership, and provides the foundation to move from good to great for anyone wishing to go beyond his personal agenda.

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«First Who Then What. Get the right people on the bus, get the wrong people off the bus, get the right people in the right seat.» - Jims Collins

First Who is not the way most of the project teams are operating today. Usually the What is defined upfront with more or less details and the Who becomes a consequence of it. What Jim Collins is suggesting is to reverse this common sequence of events, and establish from the start who will be in and who will be out. Of course a main purpose must be defined, such as project objectives, prior to the Who.

Projects are often under a lot of uncertainty. It might be the likelihood of the proposal, the people commitment, the market and the derived value proposition of the project, or external and unplanned events (political climate). The best way to prepare for this uncertainty and what you can not possibly predict, is to focus first on the who.

This tenet is certainly the most challenging of all, as it requires the project manager to intervene in company politics. The first question that he or she must answer with the top management is "Am I the right person on this bus" – Do I share the same values - do I feel holding a responsibility for what I'm going to do – am I or could I become the best person in the company to manage this project, is the top management team is expecting a Level 5 leadership? If you feel comfortable with all these questions, you might be the right person. The importance here is that you keep your freedom of choice.

The second part will be to cascade these questions to the persons you will have on the project team. And this is where internal politics can take place. However if you have gone thru the first step process (for yourself), this path should be facilitated.

Most of energy & time of Project Managers should be to identify the best people and get them in the bus. And most importantly get the wrong people off the bus. Whatever the time used to make this happen, the decision must be enforced as soon as you detect such person. As you have the right people on your project, they should be self-motivated and self-disciplined, which will considerably decrease the need to manage them. Trying to motivate or manage people is a waste of time, it should be automatically address if your are focusing first on the Who.

This question of Who applied as well to external parties such as services or product vendors. They should be selected based on the same principles. A deep discussion during the RFP or RFQ process should be engaged on the core values and purpose.

Along the way, you might find that a person well suited for a position in the project might be short, and the seat is becoming too big for him or her. It is again where great project managers dedicate themselves to identify the right path. Either reduce the size of the seat or reassign this person on an another seat.

Great project Managers know that the question of Who is on the bus (first) is what makes a project successful, and is a best way to manage uncertainty inherent to strategic projects.

«All good-to-great companies began the process of finding a path to greatness by confronting the brutal facts of their current reality.» - Jims Collins

We have all practiced project steering committee, where present executives like to see this nice dashboard green colored, and ear "The project is on target". Great project managers are distressful of their success, they worry when things are going well.

Confronting the brutal facts of the reality, even in front of an executive board is what makes the difference. No need to be alarmist, but being optimistic is the road to failure. J. Collins talked about the «Stockdale» paradox, "Never confuse unwavering absolute faith, and the discipline to begin with confronting the brutal facts".

Great project managers are convinced of success but are continuously looking for unplanned events that could challenge it. "Red Flags" are catalytic mechanisms that vest information with power. This is certainly the best tool to drive progress consistent with the values and purpose of a project. J. Collins gives an example he used with his students. Any student during the year, can raise his hand and share a critical comment on the content of the course, the quality of the teaching, a recommendation.... When happening the course will stop and the student will speak freely. He or she can do it once in the year. This simple mechanism helped Jim to face reality by earring real time feedback from his students.

Let see how it could work in Project Management. Every projects start with what we call a "Project Management Plan" which includes project plan, risk management plan, quality assurance plan, communication plan etc.... The number of processes and procedures described in these documents can rapidly make the project highly administrative. The appropriate usage of red flags could avoid this, and promote a climate of trust. Here are some suggestions:

Any project member can ask for an unplanned meeting with all people required.

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Similar approach can be used for parties involved in the project when the quality of the relationship is at stake. The important aspect of red flag is that the project team stays focus on what they value, and anything in the course of the project that challenge these principles and values, need to be identified and emerge as a critical problem to solve.

All in all, a project is a place where denial can appear at any point of time. It is important that project manager promotes a culture of freedom of speech and standard mechanisms to avoid this drawback.

«A Hedgehog Concept is a simple, crystalline concept that flows from deep understanding about the intersection of the following three circles: What are you deeply passionate about? What can you be the best in the world at? What drives your economical engine?» - Jims Collins

One of the key findings of J. Collins in the analysis of this concept is that "it took four years in average for the Good to Great companies to get a Hedgehog Concept". It will be foolish in our case trying to figure out how to apply this concept to a specific project. However we might approach it thru the Project Manager Career.

Although Project Management is often considered as a unique and coherent discipline, multiple profiles of project managers exist. We observe individuals thriving in a specific industry (Telecom, Public sector etc. . .), in a specific discipline (Building, logistic, Information technology etc.), in a specific nature of project (small and straight forward versus large and complex). It appears that successful PMs tend to identify along their career the ideal association of several project characteristics, in which they will excel (finding therefore their own Hedgehog Concept)

Passion At Work

I'm always baffled by the level of excitement of great project managers whilst they are talking about their current endeavor. They have the art of laying it down in a way that you are immediately willing to join them and be part of the team. We can feel them fully engaged and committed on the highest level to the success of the initiative. This is what we called Passion. I'm sure you remember this guy/girl coming with a big smile on his/her face talking hours on a subject that you didn't suspect it might interest someone, but you are still listening every words said. This person have found the perfect work, where he/she can ignite his/her passion on a daily basis. Looking at your own career do you picture projects that

provide you with this level of excitement and commitment? By finding the common traits of these projects you might understand what you are deeply passionate about.

Damned they know what they are talking about...

Great Project Managers are highly knowledgeable in the industry/discipline/area they work in. In addition they develop few skills to the highest possible level and use them on their daily challenges. It could be communication, analytical, conceptual skills. This critical association of knowledge and skill make them appear as a reference in the community. Understanding what they could be the best at, did not happen overnight but result in a true search of excellence in their profession for years.

Economics as a consequence

Great Project Managers have a strong reputation. The attractiveness of their demonstrated value proposition make them highly priced and continuously demanded. Trying to figure out what is true economical engine of a great PM, could be difficult as it highly depends on the structure is working in. However we might suspect, that gathering experience in a field they are passionate about and are considered as the bests in the world, economics could be "Annual Profit Growth".

As a conclusion, understanding your own Hedgehog Concept (consisting of the intersection of the three circles), might take years of introspection but surely is the path to greatness for Project Managers..

«The flywheel image captures the overall feel of what it was like inside the companies as they went from good to great. No matter how dramatic the end result, the good to great transformations never happen in one fell swoop. There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no wrenching revolution. Good to great comes about by a cumulative process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel – that adds up to sustained and spectacular results.» - Jims Collins

The flywheel's concept was for me certainly the most insightful of all and has truly changed the way I approach change in Project Management.

PM are often confronted with initiatives that truly challenge the established consensus, and impose an organization to change. Most of the time, we call for change agents & dedicated program to help people transitioning to the target practices. But overall the

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experience of PM regarding changes are always challenging and we never seem to learn enough to have one flawless process that guaranty success.

According to Jim Collin's study, good to great companies build momentum; step by step they are improving, and they do not seem to manage changes at all: it just happen. I understand how provocative this statement can be. However I personally discovered the power of such proposition whilst facing large strategic projects; and I have identified two principles that I try to enforce when dealing with such initiative.

1 – Building momentum starts with "Rules of engagement". After having identify the right persons in the bus, it is important to set up some ground rules that will enable the team to work appropriately. Some example could be: "Meetings start and finish on time", "Minutes are validated by the group, and always available", "On a weekly basis an hour meeting is organized, seeking improvements to the way the team operates" etc... Although these measures will not deliver instant greatness, they are here to establish its foundation. Week after week the team will improve and deliver consistent results based on these principles.

2 – Rules of Engagement should enable targeted changes: You need to build inside your project the foundation for the changes you want to implement. If in the targeted model:

- People need to communicate virtually, use your project to infuse this type of change.

- Centralization of back-office is required, embed progressively a similar approach in your project.

- Marketing need to be more proactive to customer expectation make them the champion of project improvements.

As a conclusion

By applying these principles, teams develop greatness over the life of critical projects and adaptations to change are easier.

Having said that we must recognize as professor George E. P. Box, "All models are wrong; some models are useful".

The proposal here is not to revolution the way we manage change in project, but rather to built on interesting findings to ease some of the pains we may be facing when dealing with it.

KEY CONCEPTS

- LEVEL 5 LEADERSHIP
- FISTT WHO, THEN WHAT
- CONFRONT THE BRUTAL FACTS
- THE HEDGEHOG CONCEPT
- THE FLYWHEEL CONCEPT

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