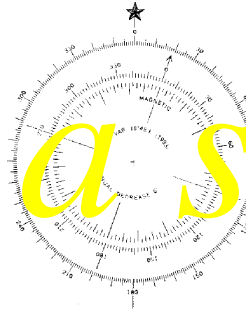


Compass



VOLUME 2, NUMBER 3, AUTUMN 1998

You're The Top!

"You're The Top!
You're the Colosseum,
You're The Top!
You're the Louvr' Museum,
You're a melody from a symphony by
Strauss,
You're a Bendel bonnet,
A Shakespeare sonnet,
You're Mickey Mouse.
You're The Nile,
You're the Tow'r of Pisa,
You're the Smile on the Mona Lisa;
I'm a worthless check,
a total wreck, a flop,
But if Baby, I'm the bottom,
You're The Top!

Cole Porter

Unconditional Superlatives

*"The best laid plans of mice and men
gang aft a-gley."*

In contrast to many of my competitors, I often qualify myself to prospective clients by explaining that at some time during the proposed engagement, they will find reason to think that they have hired the most incompetent individual imaginable. It is, I explain, what we do at this point that will define the ultimate success of the engagement. I'm not interested in spinning some unconditionally superlative yarn about myself. Nor have I found much utility in hiding behind an image of invulnerability. I'm no "big six" consulting firm, and I won't disqualify my clients by suggesting that I or anyone else can save them.

However, my workshop participants often describe their projects using unconditional superlatives. They are not building systems but redefining them; not improving but perfecting; not helping, but redeeming. Looking beyond the horizon into a place where worldly concerns pale, these folks peer through what is right before their eyes in favor of something infinitely more compelling and absolutely unachievable.

Such compelling depictions are attractive when they should be unsettling. Each flashy description leaves a residue of pixie dust obscuring a dangerous premise. The innocent swallow this ideal objective along with the barely hidden hook, line, and sinker. These leaders set into the most vulnerable possible positions their unsuspecting selves along with their equally naive project communities. They encourage everyone to follow as they enter a four foot high cavern standing six feet tall.

I find such Utopian targets in every "high performance" company. What excellent leader wouldn't aim higher than all others? Doing any less seems self-destructive and unproductive, however there is a subtle paradox at play within these well-intended aspirations. Within every unconditional superlative sprout the seeds of a startling come-uppance: The pursuit of perfection yields failure.

The pursuit of perfection yields failure.

Garrison Keillor created the fictional upper-midwestern community of Lake

Woebegone, where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." High performance companies attempt to create their own Lake Woebegones by selectively choosing their employees, expecting somehow to create a population where, like Lake Woebegone's, "All the children are above average." Yet no matter how carefully chosen the citizenry, this new population always clusters into an organization where some children are above, some are below, and some are simply average.

When an above-average anyone within this carefully selected population discovers themselves performing "below average," (as each must discover at some time) insidious results often follow. To the well-indoctrinated Lake Woebegonion, below average performance carries terrible news: "I don't belong."

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Each responds by hiding their temporary and perfectly normal incompetence so that they can continue to belong where “everyone [except themselves] is above average.” Over time, these organizations become progressively dumber, as they miss opportunities to learn from their mistakes. Sociologists call this outcome the “Lake Wobegone Effect,” where combining the best and brightest results in ever poorer results. This is one of the most compelling illustrations of the insidious effects of unconditional superlatives.



Making Your Cake and Eating It Too!

Between the idea and the reality of cake are many steps that do not resemble cake. Organizations pursuing unconditional superlatives struggle to embrace the uncake-like outcomes by which process creates cake. They expect each interim deliverable to satisfy the same

success criteria as the final product. They do not want to make cake, but to have cake.

Leaders attempting to motivate by such alluring objectives garner hollow support. Those who are promised cake are inevitably disappointed with batter. Those who cannot tolerate batter should not pursue cake.

“Those who cannot tolerate batter should not pursue cake.”

The objective of envisioning work is to create a fully competent project community. Promising cake without mentioning batter disqualifies community. Who needs such disabling inspiration?

So, what constitutes a best-laid plan in a community where acknowledging normally expected complications generates the risk of being labeled too pessimistic? What prior experience justifies planning for a struggle when complications are viewed as exceptions rather than constant companions? Management requests best-case scenarios from teams who feel as though they cannot speak their truth without disqualifying themselves. Management in return gets frail minimalist plans that can only deliver deferred disappointment.

Some planners consider every contingency, as if good plans were those that circumstance could never overrun. In-

flated plans have initial shock value, but are no better laid than their minimalist counterparts. Some believe that the larger the estimate the “more realistic” it is. Project team members wrestle with their management, bidding up what the other bids down, as if the plan were the project. Both are trying to avoid what their strategies inevitably engineer: failure. Real failure is the failure to acknowledge the normal complications involved in doing any novel thing.

The best-laid plan is not the one that will never fall apart. The best-laid plan is one where the objective is reached, whether or not the plan survives the project. The best-laid plans do not hobble the project when they fall apart, rather they inform it.

Succeeding in this way requires a fully qualified community: management, suppliers, customers, and team. Every project starts with a fixed amount of disappointment, all of which must be dispersed before the project can conclude. Finding the courage to talk about what “shouldn't be talked about” and create shared meaning will disperse this disappointment one bitter, but digestible spoonful at a time. Conversely, keeping your own counsel will defer disbursement until the retained volume becomes the entire disgusting menu. Organizations whose projects ignore complications in favor of unconditional superlatives lay plans destined to hatch into catastrophes.

Avoiding the “gang aft a-gley” is impossible and unnecessary. A well-qualified project community will discover how to achieve their objectives in the ashes of their initial expectations, after they've crashed and burned. Transformation requires experiencing chaos: every emergent understanding is first an emergency. How we deal with this emergency, not how well we avoid it, ultimately creates the outcome we'll embrace. das



Tips for “Alien” Project Managers

- Aliens can see what locals cannot. Be careful that you don't scare or shock unnecessarily or unconsciously.
- Aliens can't know all the local customs. Don't let this lack of knowledge freeze you in the headlights.
- Aliens speak different languages, so it is useful to use metaphors to gain understanding.
- Remember that you are an alien - and that eventually locals will treat you like a local- Don't forget that you are an alien.
- Aliens cannot read local minds- They must always ask to learn what that act meant.
- We are all aliens.

Should You Attend An Open Enrollment Mastering Projects Workshop?

**Take a few moments to consider the following questions, then you decide.
One or more 'yes' answers disqualifies you.**

1- My company is sponsoring an in-house Mastering Projects Workshop.

2- I am not now nor will I ever lead or participate in a project.

**3- I already know how to predict the future and manage my way out of any difficulty.
(If this is the case, we'll pay you to attend so we can learn from you!)**

4- I am not interested in improving my ability to teach myself how to better manage projects.

A Thousand Clowns

Several years ago, I engaged in some "hit-and-run harassment" on a new Compuserve forum for Project and Cost Managers. One of the skirmishes was on the subject of what Project Management curriculum should include. Those of you who have attended my Mastering Projects Workshop know that I am barely charitable toward the project management world's certifying agencies, who graduate cowboys with big hats, little horses, and even less horse sense.

My contribution to the discussion sparked some interesting -mostly negative- responses. (I acknowledge that denial is the first stage of acceptance.) Some of you might have experienced the frustrations of working with those who have the future all figured out. I am occasionally haunted by them, although I have always successfully ditched each one in turn. Neither life or project management is simply about certainty. Life has a way of bringing the most certain among us down a peg or two, when we least suspect that we really need it.

"Neither life or project management is simply about certainty. Life has a way of bringing the most certain among us down a peg or two, when we least suspect that we really need it."

The following is an excerpt from that initial rant. It has aged better than I have and I will appreciate your comments (positive or negative), additions, and

rants in return.

"...And when he started to make those lists this year. Lists of everything; subway stops, underwear, what he's going to do next week. If somebody doesn't watch out he'll start making lists of what he's going to do next year and the next ten years. Hey, suppose they put him in with a whole family of list-makers? (Angrily) I didn't spend six years with him so he should turn into a listmaker. He'll learn to know everything before it happens, he'll learn to plan, he'll learn how to be one of those nice dead people. Are you listening?..."

"...Then stamp your feet or mutter so I'll know you're there, huh? (Still speaking quite calmly) I just want him to stay with me till I can be sure he won't turn into Norman Nothing. I want to be sure he'll know when he's chickening out on himself. I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won't notice it when it starts to go. I want him to stay awake and know who the phonies are, I want him to know how to holler and put up an argument, I want a little guts to show before I can let him go. I want to be sure he sees all the wild possibilities. I want him to know it's worth all the trouble just to give the world a little goosing when you get the chance. And I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason why he was born a human being and not a chair."
Murray Burns in Herb Gardner's "A Thousand Clowns"

Herb Gardner gives a wonderfully concise project management curriculum. It should include:

1. A close working relationship with someone who knows something about themselves, about managing projects, and who is managing projects,
2. Some training on personal responsibilities, so they know when they're chickening out,
3. Some training on who they are, so they'll know when they're compromising themselves,
4. Some training on how to recognize phonies, including themselves (as appropriate),
5. Some training on how not to get along; when and how to raise a fuss,
6. Some training to increase courage,
7. Some training to expand the ability to see wild possibilities,
8. Final exam: goose the world and write a short essay on why you were not born a chair!

Give me a curriculum that helps individuals better see their effect on the world around them and the world's effect on themselves, and much of the rest will take care of itself.

This is what the Mastering Projects Workshop is about! das

"Man will occasionally stumble over the truth, but usually manages to pick himself up, walk over or around it, and carry on." Winston S. Churchill

Notices:

Upcoming Weinberg and Weinberg Problem Solving Leadership Workshops:

December 13-19, Albuquerque

Contact Suzi Brame at Wk: (503) 721-0908 or Fx: (503) 226-9066 or **Suzeque@aol.com** for details.

Open enrollment Mastering Projects Workshops will be presented in Minneapolis on November 10-12 and in Portland, Oregon on January 12-14, 1999. Contact Suzi Brame at: **Suzeque@aol.com** or Wk: (503) 721-0908 or Fx: (503) 226-9066 for details.

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you will ever use.”**

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About Compass

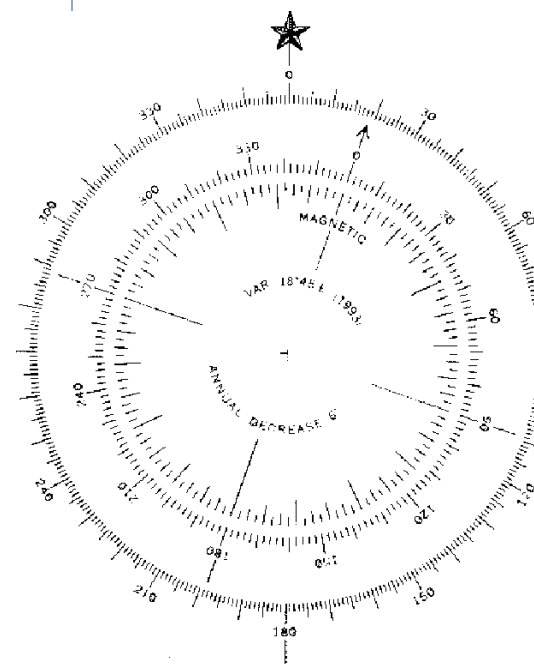
Compass is published quarterly by *True North* pgs, Inc., and is distributed free of charge to a project-oriented community now numbering over 3000.

I've created *Compass* as a navigation tool for continuing your process of becoming a project manager. *Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective project leadership to your team. It is through sharing our stories and our insights that we enable each other to improve the quality of our project experiences.

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Appreciations:

Robin Ellingson of The St. Paul Companies for welcoming the aliens in.

Kathy Swendsen of The St. Paul Companies for going out on a limb.

Brian Lassiter and Giana Bari-Lassiter for coordinating the Minneapolis Open Enrollment class in June.

Amy Schwab for being awake on the job (and for her amazing ahas).

Sharon Petrella of Advanstar for asking me back.

Jerry Weinberg for posting my newsletter on his website (Check it out at www.geraldweinberg.com).

Kristi Haftorsen for coordinating the Dialogic Santa Clara Workshop.

Kathy Duran for coordinating the Dialogic Parsippany, New Jersey Workshop.

Wilder Schmaltz for the graphics.

Kathy Carey for the editing.

Mark Grey of the Los Alamos National Labs for stepping far outside Schrödinger's box.

Kathy Milhauser at Nike for bringing people across the finish line that doesn't exist.

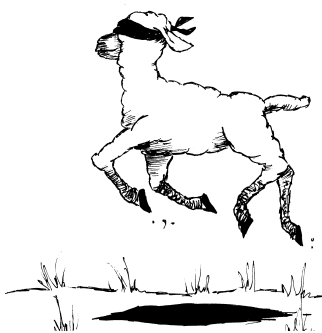
Amy's Amazing Aha!

It took me awhile to understand David's first law of project management: "Never be needier than your project." I learned what this means while leading a huge corporate project.

I assumed that as a project manager I was responsible for ensuring that my project succeeded. Success meant getting the job done and keeping everyone happy. Anything less was failure and I didn't intend to fail!! I was certain that my experience

and technical competence, which won me the project manager role, would lead me to success.

The specter of incompetence haunted me throughout the project. To avoid being found out I painstakingly drafted a "perfect" project charter designed to generate no disagreement. I pointed out the key risks to the project of inadequate staffing and political fragmentation but, to demonstrate my competence, I made endless concessions. With a constantly mutating objective and an inexperienced team we gamboled out onto the playing field.



I tried to protect the team by helping them avoid mistakes and by shielding them from the politics. I was determined to do whatever it took to make my project succeed. I ate, slept, and breathed my project.

A long, painful year into this death march I stepped back and inventoried the situation. I began to realize that I so needed to make the project succeed that I was not acknowledging the truth: The project had no clear objective and the organization was not capable of provisioning and sustaining a project of this scope.

I wanted to go public with my discovery, but instead I heeded my advisors' warnings of the political dangers of honesty. I spent nine more months trying to protect the project from the inevitable. Eventually, with a new advisor and a big lesson in the political dangers of NOT disclosing the truth, we ended the project.

The seeds of my project's failure were apparent at the beginning, in my very definition of success. By framing my success as being dependent upon the project turning out a certain way, I guar-

anteed failure. However, within this apparent failure were the real seeds of my success. Now "Never be needier than your project" is Amy's first law of project management, too. aas

What Traditional Project Management Training Doesn't Teach You About Managing Projects Can Hurt You!

1. You are the most powerful project management tool you will ever use.

Rather than trying to automate the management of projects, try tuning up the tool that is most likely to make a real difference. You!

2. The key to managing projects effectively is to create self-managing projects.

If the project is not able to take care of itself, it won't succeed. More projects fail because they are unmanageable than because they have been mismanaged!

3. The key to creating self-managing projects is to encourage open rather than closed-system behavior within your project community.

Classic project management strategies focus on closing the system, saying "Put the project in a box and defend the boundaries." Many projects today defy such predictive management. They must instead be managed by an adaptive process -- an open rather than a closed system strategy.

4. Project work is more effective when its fun.

Project team members who are enjoying their experience create higher-quality products than those who are suffering. Failing to attend to the quality of your team's experience is an act of sabotage and an act of self destruction for a project manager!



The story goes that you can only become a project manager through experience, that is, you can only become a project manager by being a project manager. This is a paradox. If you have to experience being a project manager to become a project manager, where do you start? There is no possible way to qualify.

Perhaps we become something by first being something else. Like in the following piece, “All I Know About Project Management I Learned As a Pot Washer,” maybe project management is learned in some completely different context.

We each have a tremendous collection of knowledge and insight about project management that we've gained from our non-project management experiences. This knowledge and these insights are important, because they form the context within which we collect our actual project management experience and build our formal project management skills.

This foundation can be our best asset and our worst liability. If we are aware of our beliefs, what we already “know” about project management, it can be our best asset. However, it becomes a liability if we are unaware, unresponsive, and a pre-occupied captive of what we already know.

All I Know About Project Management I Learned As a Pot Washer

1. Don't be ego-driven. If you do your job perfectly, no one will notice. If you want recognition, you'll have to screw something up!
2. You can limit the amount of rework if you have naturally high standards and understand the standards of those you supply. Cooks are natural slobbers. I'm tidy. Satisfying myself more than satisfied them. This made my job easy no matter how pressured I was.
3. You don't control the arrival of new problems, and the entire operation

seems to conspire to refill your queue with dirty pots. You have to play the game, not to win, not to end the game but to improve your play over time. Because the dirty pot stream is essentially endless, playing to win or playing to end the flow is fruitless (and damned frustrating). It is an apple pie eating contest where the first prize is **MORE PIE!** Develop an unconditional taste for pie.

4. No one understands how important the unimportant players are except the unimportant players themselves. Appreciate yourself, even if no one else seems to appreciate what you do.
5. You're the only one who can make your work pleasant, and you have a responsibility to yourself to do that! Okay, coming in to work at six in the morning to find a hundred rotting chicken pans thrown into the corner by the overnight catering crew can be a disconcerting experience, but whining about it all day won't help. Better to look at it as an opportunity to organize chaos and see what's to be learned this time.



6. Pans wash faster if they're organized first. Even though sorting and stacking by type of mess and shape of pan is not actually WASHING pots, it is an enabling activity which shortens the overall time it takes to wash the pile of pots. Planning helps.
7. Keep the customers out of the kitchen, especially out of the pot washer's corner. The customer has an interest in the end product, not in the means of production. Some of the steps in the production are not for the uninitiated. By all means be open, but

also be sensitive. A customer's perception of value will not be enhanced by seeing how a product is made and especially not by seeing how it's cleaned up after.

8. If the job comes with a free lunch, it's not really free.
9. Change the water frequently. The hotter the water, the easier the work. Even though changing the water creates leisure time, it shortens the overall flow time through the queue. Those who just hunker down and work without changing the water work harder, get tired faster, and clean pots more slowly. das

David's Note:

Hi, for those of you who don't yet know me, I'm David A. Schmaltz, President of *True North* pgs, Inc.

Ping<<<<<<<<<<<<lll
Kit Bradley of PSC, Inc. reminded me over dinner recently that what I told him before the workshop about reinforcement was really true. The key issue is support in practical application. We discussed the issue for a while before Kit suggested that I consider sending a brief periodic email reinforcement to all who have attended my workshop.

I liked the idea immediately. I referred to it as a “Ping”, a quick sonar reading to confirm the present course. I'd like to try this. If you've attended the Mastering Projects Workshop or my Managing Projects@Sun Workshop, and you're interested in subscribing to this series of periodic, brief reinforcements via email, please send us a note with your email address to tn@ix.netcom.com.

If you have not attended the workshop but are interested in subscribing to the Pings anyway, let me know. This is presently a bright idea. I'll rely upon you to let me know if there's a project in here.

das

