



CUTTINGS

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Compiled and edited by Geof Cox

Five Crucial Conversations

A couple of issues ago I reported on project management in *The Chickens are in Charge*. One of the comments in that article was that "projects are not scripted performances, they are conversations." Now research by VitalSmarts, reported in *Projects@Work* expands on this and the impact of communication on project execution.

One of the keys to successful project management is holding the right conversations on the right issues at the right times. For any given initiative, there will be a handful of crucial conversations that the best project managers will make sure take place. But more often than not, these conversations do not take place and silence and suspicion rule.

Researcher David Maxfield makes a distinction between two types of communication failure. "One is unintentional: Information falls between the cracks — between phases of the project, between departments, between professionals. That's not what we're talking about here. We're talking

about where you know there is something wrong. There is an elephant in the room, the emperor has no clothes, and nobody is speaking up."

Maxfield identified five crucial conversations that are critical to the success of most projects, but are routinely avoided:

1. Confronting an AWOL sponsor.

Too often, sponsors get something going, but then fail to provide the support or assistance needed — they back off and the project dies, but slowly.

2. Challenging arbitrary deadlines and inadequate resources

This is a big one, according to the research — 80 percent of project managers routinely experience this problem, and when they did, the results were ugly: 74 percent of these projects went over budget; 82 percent missed their deadline; 79 percent failed to meet quality or functionality specs; and 67 percent of the time team morale was damaged. Most discouraging of all, 93 percent of project managers described this problem as "difficult" to "impossible" to confront and successfully resolve.

3. Confronting people who are inappropriately influencing priorities

Powerful people often skirt or manipulate the priority setting process. They use their political clout. So when a project manager says 'no' to a change request, he suddenly finds his CEO countermanding the decision after a representation from the requestor.

4. Dealing with ineffective or absentee team members

Some members on the project team are either unwilling or incapable of supporting your project. They may attend the meetings, but they don't do any work, and you often don't notice until you are seriously behind.

5. Openly discussing problems before they cause failure

Especially with high visibility projects, project managers and team members often don't admit when there are problems. They are either blind to the difficulties, or just hope they might go away.

These are problems that don't fix themselves, they need to be confronted, otherwise the project becomes a slow-motion train crash, with the project manager taking most of the eventual blame.

Crucial Conversations, Projects@Work podcast

In Praise of the Incomplete Leader

Is there such a thing as a "complete leader?" The label applied to the supremely talented individual, skilled in all ways, who can be everything to everyone. Any nominations?

In a recent HBR article, Deborah Ancona, Thomas Malone, Wanda Orlikowski, and Peter Senge challenge the myth of the complete leader, arguing in their article that "only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete — as having both strengths and weakness — will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others."

The authors identify four areas that are essential for leadership:

- Sense making: understanding the context in which a company and its people operate;
- Relating: building relationships within and across organizations;
- Visioning: creating a compelling picture of the future;
- Inventing: developing new ways to achieve the vision.

Typically, even top leaders are strong in one or two of these capabilities. Andy Grove of Intel is a sense maker. Herb Kelleher, of Southwest Airlines, excels at relating. Steve Jobs is a visionary. Meg Whitman innovates the eBay experience for buyers and sellers alike.

Once leaders diagnose their strengths and weakness, they can search for those who can fill in the gaps, a process the authors call "balancing the four capabilities." — surrounding themselves with people who have complementary skill sets.

Doing so can simultaneously improve the functioning of the organization while lowering expectation pressures on the leader. "It's time to celebrate the incomplete — that is, the human — leader

In Praise of the Incomplete Leader, Deborah Ancona, Thomas W. Malone, Wanda J. Orlikowski, and Peter M. Senge, Harvard Business Review, February, 2007

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Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations ...

- ✂ "A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be." *Wayne Gretzky*
- ✂ "If you're going to have a fantasy, why not go first class?" *Marvin Weisbord*
- ✂ "The best way to predict the future is to create it!" *Peter Drucker*
- ✂ "There are two ways of being creative. One can sing and dance. Or one can create an environment in which singers and dancers flourish." *Warren Bennis*
- ✂ "Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony" *Mohandas Gandhi*
- ✂ "The person saying that it can't be done should not interrupt the person doing it." *Chinese proverb*
- ✂ "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." *Muriel Rukeyser*
- ✂ "A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he gets to know something." *Wilson Mizner*
- ✂ "The secret of success is consistency of purpose" *Benjamin Disraeli*
- ✂ "You tried your best, and you failed miserably. The lesson is, never try." *Homer Simpson*
- ✂ "There's no secret about success. Did you ever know a successful man who didn't tell you about it?" *Kin Hubbard*
- ✂ "If we are to enjoy the efficiencies and other benefits of the virtual organization, we will have to rediscover how to run organizations based more on trust than on control. Virtuality requires trust to make it work: Technology on its own is not enough." *Charles Handy*
- ✂ "All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another." *Anatole France*
- ✂ "There is a certain relief in change, even though it be from bad to worse! As I have often found in travelling in a stagecoach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position, and be bruised in a new place." *Washington Irving*
- ✂ "If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful after all." *Michelangelo*

Structured Procrastination

An article in the Guardian newspaper has raised a trait that I have in abundance to the level of modern philosophy – and therefore something that sounds eminently laudable!

Structured procrastination as a concept was put forward by Stanford University professor of philosophy John Perry in a paper in 1995 – which he wrote as a way of doing something that meant that he didn't have to do a lot of other (more important) things.

Perry writes: "The key idea is that procrastinating does not mean doing absolutely nothing. Procrastinators seldom do absolutely nothing, they do marginally useful things, like gardening or sharpening pencils or making a diagram of how they will reorganise their files when they get around to it." (Or transcribe this article into this edition of Cuttings!)

Perry channels an ostensibly bad habit and "converts procrastinators into effective human beings, respected and admired for all that they can accomplish, and the good use they make of time."

"Why does a procrastinator do these things? Because they are a way of not doing something more important ... The procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely and important tasks, as long as these tasks are not a way of not doing something more important." So writing Cuttings is important and difficult, but not as important and difficult as a number of other things I could be doing now.

"Structured procrastination means shaping the structure of tasks one has to do in a way that exploits this fact. The list of tasks one has in mind will be ordered by importance. Tasks that seem most urgent and important are on top. But there are also worthwhile tasks to perform lower down the list. Doing these tasks becomes a way of not doing the things higher up the list."

Perry finally points out that "structured procrastination requires a certain amount of self-deception, since one is, in effect, constantly perpetuating a pyramid scheme on oneself... This is not a problem, because virtually all procrastinators have excellent self-deceptive skills. And what could be more noble than using one character flaw to offset the bad effects of another?"

The Guardian, 15 May 2007

Senior executives get less development

A recent Novations Group survey has confirmed what leadership development professionals have long known – top management is sometimes ambivalent when it comes to training. Although the rate at which senior-level people get development support is probably greater than at any time in the past with organisations concerned about bench strength and retiring baby boomers. Novations' findings also indicate how important organisations consider training for first-line managers. The appropriate survey result is reproduced below:

Which of the following employee categories at your organisation will receive training & development this year? (Select all that apply.)

Entry-level employees: 82 percent
Experienced non-management employees: 75 percent
First-line managers: 90 percent
Middle-level executives: 76 percent
Senior-level executives: 59 percent

Reported in Ignite Development & Learning Ltd e-newsletter

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