



CUTTINGS

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The Chickens are in Charge

Project managers can't manage projects because of a little respected law called *Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety*. Ashby, a scientist who worked in the little-understood control theory field, concluded that control depends upon the controller having at least as much "variety" as the system he tries to control.

Variety is one of those scientific terms with a very specific meaning, but it's summed up nicely by the engineer who remarked of a complex project scope: "It's like pulling a stagecoach with chickens. You can do it, but the reins management will kill you." The controller has to have enough hands to hold onto the reins!

Over time three strategies for dealing with not enough hands have developed:

- 1 **Dumb down the system**—allow no more reins than the number of hands. This approach can leave many chickens uncontrolled or take away so many chickens that the remaining birds can no longer pull the coach. Alternatively, it can require so many people to hold reins that the chickens can no longer pull the stage or shrink the stagecoach to where it can no longer carry anyone to hold the reins.
- 2 **Train the chickens** so that they don't need anyone controlling their

reins. Chickens are relatively easy to train, and this strategy doesn't seem completely absurd, until the sponsor wonders why the stagecoach isn't moving yet: this strategy can transform the effort into more training than stagecoaching.

- 3 **Accept the unmanageability** of the situation. This strategy doesn't look very much like managing, and is the least acceptable of the three. Yet it is the only workable strategy among them.

The chickens are always in charge because they can generate more variety than any single controller. The chickens cannot be trained to operate autonomously from the controller without some unrealistically detailed foreseeing, training, and choreography beforehand. We can find resolution for this eternal dilemma in conversation, and the recognition that everyone, both the chickens and the poor fool tapped to handle the reins, have important things to say about the stagecoach.

When it comes to managing complex systems, the most we can say is that no one knows and everyone could be learning. Whether they learn or not seems to depend upon everyone more fully acknowledging that they don't yet know. Control emerges not from the

driver or the chickens. Control, if it is to be achieved, will appear in the space between the system and its so-called controller.

Projects are not scripted performances, they are conversations. Their purpose shifts, depending upon the meanings we make in conversation and the significances we acknowledge between us. When we can speak our truth—what's true for us—without insisting that it be true for others, and when we can hear another's truth without insisting that it must agree with ours, we are having a conversation. It's not a conversation and it's really not control unless we are prepared to be changed by whatever we hear. Ask the thermostat.

The reason project managers can't manage projects is because projects are unmanageable. The project manager's responsibilities, as written, describe a fool's mission. The few who succeed resolve this eternal dilemma by more fully acknowledging it. They accept that, while their project is unmanageable, it might be capable of controlling itself. Not, however, by management command and control, but through conversation.

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MINDSET: The New Psychology of Success

Stanford professor Carol Dweck identifies 2 different mindsets that play critical roles in whether we succeed at what matters to us, or not.

People working with a *fixed* mindset believe their intelligence, talents, and abilities are fixed traits. You have it or you do not. Nothing can be done to change it. So they focus on proving that they are talented and able. They hide weaknesses from others, and themselves. They close themselves off from learning new ways of doing

things, and from growing their talents and abilities focus and effort.

People with a *growth* mindset believe their intelligence, talents, and abilities can be developed through passion, practice, and persistence. They do not have to prove they are smart or able. They can risk failing and looking foolish. For them, it is not about looking smart, or grooming an image. It is about learning what it takes to create the results they most want.

The good news is you can learn to work from a growth mindset, and so

create success far beyond that which you have been able to create so far.

And it is not hard to learn! Managers who were taught the growth mindset in 90-minute workshops succeeded in shifting from a fixed to a growth mindset, and sustained their results. In the workshops, they read an article and watched a video about how the brain changes and grows with learning and then take four simple actions

MINDSET: The New Psychology of Success, Carol Dweck – from Bruce Elkin's *Simplicity & Success* newsletter

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Snippets

A seasonal bumper collection of thought provokers and quotations

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- ✂ "Man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions" *Oliver Wendell Holmes*
- ✂ "Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself." *Martin Vanbee*
- ✂ In the European Union one half of the available workforce is outside of organisations, not in full-time jobs.
- ✂ "52% of all projects finish at 189% of their initial budget, and some after huge investment of time and money are simply never completed" *The Standish Group*
- ✂ "A conclusion is the place where you got tired of thinking." *Steven Wright*
- ✂ "Be curious always! For knowledge will not acquire you, you must acquire it." *Sudie Back*
- ✂ "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." *Confucius*
- ✂ "There are really only three types of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who say, 'What happened?'" *Ann Landers*
- ✂ "Well done is better than well said." *Benjamin Franklin*
- ✂ "When you make a mistake, don't look back at it long. Take the reason of the thing into your mind, and then look forward. Mistakes are lessons of wisdom. The past cannot be changed. The future is yet in your power." *Hugh White*
- ✂ "Conflict is everywhere: water hitting rock, teachers pushing students to learn, or wolves trying to coexist with ranchers. It is our call to evolve. It challenges us to look beyond our current views to an expanded reality. It is a relentless teacher that asks us to see unity where before we found opposites." *Deidre Comb*
- ✂ God grant me the courage to change the things I can change; the serenity to accept those things I cannot change; and the wisdom to know the difference.
- ✂ "A system of education is not one thing, nor does it have a single definite object, nor is it a mere matter of schools. Education is that whole system of human training within and without the schoolhouse walls, which moulds and develops us." *James Baldwin*

Managing Virtual and Remote Teams

Virtual teams are commonplace, but they demand new skills of managers in order to sustain productivity and employee satisfaction, a new survey by BlessingWhite finds.

As report author Christopher Rice puts it: "The great majority of technical professionals and their managers rely on technology to communicate and collaborate with colleagues, but relatively few organisations address the frustrations and difficulties that arise with managing such teams."

37% of the executives surveyed find leading virtual teams to be extremely or very challenging. Executives in Europe and Asia-Pacific find the problem is particularly acute—47% and 45% respectively, possibly due to the teams based in Europe or Asia having greater cross-border challenges than a team located mostly in North America,

What hinders effective management of remote employees, according to the report, is a lack of daily face-to-face interaction which makes it easy for employees to lose touch. When team leaders and members alike have to cope with time shifts and extra-long days, misunderstandings are common and may erode the trust base. Virtual teams need careful nurturing of trusting relationships, as they tend to suffer without informal opportunities to socialise.

Executives who lead virtual teams must make conversations more personal. "When you can't just walk down the hall and check in it's hard to relate to employees as human beings. E-mail, instant messaging, web meetings, conference calls and net meeting software can help, but not without determined and skilful leadership."

Leaders have to be attuned to the mood and nuances of a virtual meeting. This report identifies the key significance of the kick off. Just as with a non-virtual meeting, the leader has to establish a rapport – creating the kind of mood that stimulates casual conversation so team members can get connected. And with everyone multi-tasking, you have to keep them engaged and focused. And a final finding: encourage people to have their own separate one-on-one calls beforehand to help build relationships and maximise the group's efficiency.

Virtual Teams Are Routine, but now managers need new skills, BlessingWhite

360 degree Assessments

Before you start using 360 degree assessments, you might want to take a look at some research. Gallup has some critical articles on their website, and Watson Wyatt has found in both their 2001/02 and 2005 Human Capital Index Studies that the use of 360 degree feedback instruments produced a negative return on investment.

From their 2001/02 study they said "It succeeds when an open culture is already in place. It succeeds when participants have been well trained to give and receive feedback. It succeeds when there is valid and reliable instrumentation and appropriate follow-up. When one or more of these elements is missing, it can be a lengthy distraction that interferes with teamwork, and reduces productivity, and, ultimately, shareholder value."

From their 2005 study they stated succinctly "Our research has shown time and again that 360 degree performance evaluations do not translate into improved performance."

One thought: if you have an open culture and train everyone how to give and receive feedback, then will you have the need for 360 degree assessments?

PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

The 2007 calendar of public courses run by Geof Cox and colleagues in New Directions and Learning Consortium is published on our websites.

In company programmes are also available – please call for advice.

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