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FROM COMMANDER TO SPONSOR: MANAGING UPWARDS IN A PROJECT ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

Senior managers in an organisation have usually attained those positions by displaying aptitude for surviving in the corporate jungle. This aptitude includes the ability to recognise potential enemies, use pre-emptive strikes to neutralise competition and managing tasks and staff through the precepts of command and control. However, when these senior managers are appointed to the Senior Leadership Team, their skills and behaviours need to be more focussed on motivation, support and leadership rather than command and control. Many senior managers find changing the habits of a working lifetime difficult to achieve.

Studies have consistently shown that the active support of stakeholders from the Senior Leadership Team, particularly the sponsor, is a critical factor in creating successful project outcomes. Successful project managers not only understand this but are also willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that their senior stakeholders understand and fulfil this support role. This requires the project manager to be skilful at building and maintaining robust relationships, focused on engaging the support of senior executives through understanding and managing their expectations through targeted communication. Effective communication helps change perceptions and adjust expectations (to make them more realistic and achievable), as well as helping to acquire the support necessary for project success.

Two case-studies based on the joint experiences of the authors will be used to describe typical situations a project manager may encounter in ‘managing upwards’. These case studies will define the framework of the ‘command and control’ school of traditional management practice, providing the foundation for discussion of the techniques that will assist moving management thinking towards the ‘sponsor’ school. The techniques include establishing a reputation for trustworthiness and effective delivery of results, managing the expectations, and therefore the support, of key senior stakeholders using influence networks, targeted communication and plain persistence. A ‘lessons learned’ will complete the paper, describing the actions and the results of the case study situations and testing the theory, before making any modifications to these reflections based on practitioner experience.

This paper focuses on the critical project management survival skill of engaging senior managers, and of ‘helping them help you’. It will be organised as follows: firstly a brief overview of stakeholder management theory and then moving to focus on senior management stakeholders. The second section explores aspects of managing upwards – the culture of organisational leadership and the demands of decision making in today’s competitive environment. This section is followed by the case studies and through them an exploration of ways to secure and maintain the engagement and support of senior stakeholders. The final section will test the theories and make suggestions about ways that project managers can adapt their sponsor management practices to ensure a greater chance of project success.

Stakeholders – who and why

Stakeholder management methodologies provide guidance in understanding and managing the expectations of stakeholders. One methodology, the *Stakeholder Circle*®, provides a 5-step process to identify, prioritise, visualise, engage and communicate with the ‘stakeholders that matter’, and finally monitor the effectiveness of that communication¹. Stakeholders are defined as: *Individuals or groups who are impacted by, or can impact, the work or its outcomes* (Walker, Bourne and Rowlinson, 2008). This definition describes a wide group of potential stakeholders and implies that the large numbers of groups and individuals selected in any identification exercise will have to be further analysed.

The underlying principle of the *Stakeholder Circle*® methodology is that the community of project stakeholders will change as the project moves through its lifecycle, and as the structure of the performing organisation changes. The *Stakeholder Circle*® methodology is examined in detail

¹ For more on the Stakeholder Circle see www.stakeholder-management.com

elsewhere (Bourne, 2007): for this paper it is sufficient to describe the five steps which guide the team through all essential activities for identifying the 'right' stakeholder for any time in the projects, and develop the most appropriate communication strategies for engaging these key stakeholders. The five steps are:

- Step 1 – identify all stakeholders and document their expectations;
- Step 2 – prioritise;
- Step 3 - visualise the key stakeholders, showing each stakeholder's relative importance, power and influence;
- Step 4 – engage through understanding each stakeholder's attitude to the project and develop targeted communication;
- Step 5 – monitor the effectiveness of this communication.

Stakeholders' Influence

The methodology categorises stakeholders according to their 'direction of influence'; how they may influence the project or be influenced by the work of the project or its outcomes. These directions are: *upwards* (senior managers), *downwards* (the team), *sideways* (peers of the PM) and *outwards* (outside the project); managing the expectations and gaining the support of each type of stakeholder depend on understanding the how best to manage the relationships described by these categories.

Managing *upwards* is about developing and maintaining robust relationships with those senior managers whose support is vital to maintain organisational commitment to the project. Managing *downwards* is about managing the team. *Sideways* refers to the project manager's peers and defines communication approaches to ensure collaboration rather than competition. Managing *outwards* involves considering the needs and impacts of a large group of stakeholders external to the project, and often external to the performing organisation. This group will include a diverse group of people ranging from governments to voters, clients or customers to suppliers. Each of these *outwards* stakeholder groups will have different requirements of the project. They are grouped in one 'direction of influence', but it is important to clarify their requirements of the project and their impacts on the project as separate entities. While all stakeholders are important, the focus of this paper will be on those *upwards* stakeholders who represent the organisation's leadership team and its commitment to the project outcomes.

Managing (or advising) upwards

Upwards stakeholders may consider that project success equals 'on time, on budget and delivering the specified scope' and that the PM must deliver to these criteria. However, the reality of successful project management is that senior stakeholders, particularly the sponsor, must play a far more active and overtly supportive role to ensure project success. It is part of the project manager's role to not only recognise this principle, but also to do whatever is necessary to ensure that senior stakeholders understand and fulfil the requirements of the sponsor role. This is about creativity in relationship management: there is no template or checklist to follow - only observation of other more skilled and experienced managers and guidelines such as will be offered in this paper.

Focus on Upwards

To understand more about what it means to be a senior manager in a large organisation, it is important to explore the nature and culture of organisational leadership: what it takes to reach a senior management position, and the demands of decision making in today's competitive environment. This section of the paper will examine the theories of leadership and then discuss the reality of the culture of today's leaders and senior managers. An exploration of the extension of traditional leadership theory in the guise of a description of what it takes to be an effective sponsor will build on this analysis.

There is extensive literature on leadership and what makes a good leader, but newly appointed senior managers struggle to make the transition to the ranks of the Senior Leadership Team. The Watkins (2003) study of Fortune 500 organisations identified four broad categories of challenges for new senior managers:

- Letting go of ‘hands on’ detail and thinking/acting more strategically;
- Develop new and unfamiliar skills and behaviours in an environment with new rules;
- Managing upwards (*yes they have to do it too!*);
- Balancing early wins with realistic goals (*getting ‘runs on the board’*).

The transition strategies that these new senior managers reported as being successful included:

- Managing upwards through clarifying expectations of key stakeholders on objectives, goals and leadership styles;
- Building alliances and support structures through establishing personal credibility with stakeholders and understanding the culture (of the organisation, but also of the leadership team - peers);
- Focus on personal reinvention – substituting skills, values and behaviours not appropriate to the new role with those that were appropriate.

The challenges and transition strategies that these new senior managers recognised they need to address are exactly the same as the challenges and strategies that project managers need to use to manage the relationships with these same senior stakeholders!

The nature of leadership

Leadership can be defined simply as a relationship with two major components: leaders must have followers; and these followers must be inspired or motivated to achieve a joint vision. Leaders must exhibit flexibility and have credibility (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). ‘Leadership’ is traditionally described as the antithesis of control and power-oriented mind-sets: it is more an understanding of the need for shared accountability between leader and followers (Ready and Conger, 2003).

Being a leader

Personal styles and characteristics defined by traditional leadership theory as necessary for successful leadership include creativity, analysis and judgement, resilience and persuasiveness (Kinder and Robertson, 1994); and emotional maturity - ‘emotional intelligence’ (Goleman, 2000). Table 1 attempts to distil and summarise the essence of leadership defined in this way. It becomes clear that what is needed is a set of skills that can be defined in the balance of right brain/left brain characteristics, or as a balance of analytical and creative.

Table 1 Personal Characteristics of a good leader (Block, 1983; Kinder and Robertson, 1994; Webster, 1994; Goleman, 2000; Yukl, 2002)

Webster	Kinder et al	Yukl	Goleman	Block
Left brain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis and judgement • control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis and judgement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introspection • Control • Analysis and judgement
Right brain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative • Spatial • Holistic • Emotive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity • Persuasiveness • Resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-confidence • Integrity • Emotional Maturity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social awareness • Self-awareness • Social skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insight into others’ goals and motivations • Creativity • Tenacity

The culture of organisational leadership

It is important to recognise some of the actual influences that lead to the current culture of organisational leadership. Bolman and Deal (1991) describe the traditional organisation hierarchical structure as *vertical coordination* – where higher levels in the hierarchy use “authority, rules and policies, and, planning and control systems” to control the work of the lower levels. (Talbot, 2003) proposed that the development and creation of industrial and post-industrial organisational forms derived from military models, traced back to military organisational innovations of Napoleon in the early 19th century. Infrastructure projects such as the Western Railroad of the US were the catalyst for the hierarchical and bureaucratic line and staff management structure. Adopted by other railroads, it became the dominant management structure – the traditional functional structure. The language and culture of management as we practice it today has direct links to this military connection (Talbot, 2003). The military culture is echoed in the metaphor of the ‘chain of command’, business as ‘war’, with the reference manual being Sun Tzu’s, *The Art of War*, and whose language includes such terminology as ‘undefensible claims’, targets, ‘arguments shot down in flames’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1981:4).

The paradox of leadership

Collins (2001) describes a different way of thinking about leadership. He conducted research to attempt to identify the type of leadership that takes a company from ‘good to great’, and uncovered a hierarchy of leadership qualities and characteristics culminating in level 5 leadership – a blend of ‘humility’ and ‘will’ that moves a company to sustainable greatness. “Our discovery of Level 5 leadership is counterintuitive. Indeed it is countercultural. People generally assume that transforming companies from good to great requires larger-than-life leaders – big personalities like Iacocca, Dunlap, Welch, and Gault, who make headlines and become celebrities” Collins (2001:68). Traditional management theories of leadership had previously focussed (or developed) the concept of the “CEO as hero” matching the description of Level 4 leadership. The leadership hierarchy described by Collins (2001:70) p70 is:

- Level 1 – **Highly compatible individual**: contributes through talent, knowledge, skills, and good work habits;
- Level 2 – **Contributing team member**: contributes to the achievement of group objectives; works effectively with others in a group setting;
- Level 3 – **Competent manager**: organises people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of predetermined objectives;
- Level 4 – **Effective leader**: catalyses commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling visions; stimulates the group to high performance standards;
- Level 5 – **Executive**: builds sustainable greatness through a combination of personal humility plus professional will.

The importance of an effective sponsor

The role of the sponsor in Project Management is seen to be vital to project success (Roberts, 1999; Bourne, 2006) even though the roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined or agreed (Crawford and Brent, 2008). Sponsor is defined in the PMBOK as “The person or group that provides the financial resources, in cash or kind, for the project” (PMI 2004:376). Researchers (Thomas, Delisle and Jugdev, 2002:142) have defined the project sponsor as “the senior executive responsible for a portfolio, program, or project, in terms of executive decisions and approvals”. The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) defines the sponsor role as: “the interface between project ownership and delivery”. Characteristics of this role are:

- Adequate knowledge and information about the business and the project to be able to make informed decisions;

- Ability to network effectively, negotiate well and influence people, and build and maintain robust relationships with stakeholders within and outside the project (Office of Government Commerce UK, 2008).

The current view in the PM profession is that the project manager must have the support of the organisation's executive management for success (Crawford and Brent, 2008). Respondents to the survey reported on in Crawford and Brent (2008), identified the wide-ranging boundaries of the role, covering: budget allocation, supporting the project politically at all levels of the organisation; assistance with major problems; approval of the project plan, project charter and project baselines, and any major changes; assistance in resourcing the project; issue and risk management.

The roles and responsibilities of the sponsor as outlined above may become onerous or time-consuming if the individual does not understand project management practices, or does not clearly understand the role, or is not interested in doing so: the command and control management style will not easily adapt to this role. It is the responsibility of the project manager to help the sponsor help the project.

The Case Studies

The case studies represent the experiences of the authors in managing the expectations of key senior stakeholders in large organisations, and the gaining and maintaining their support. The case studies provide a foundation for exploration of the tasks needed to turn a 'commander' into a 'sponsor'. The description of the organisation itself is a hybrid of the many traditional government organisations the authors have worked with; as are the two case studies.

The Organisation

The organisation is a large, very conservative, regional Government Department, with a traditional command and control management culture, characterised by large numbers of staff with many years of employment in the same organisation and working on clearly defined operational activities. Culturally, the organisation can be split into two well defined but separate entities: they are two separate corporate cultures. The first group (blue) has a strong self identity which is clearly aligned to the departmental strategy and charter. They work under a highly structured hierarchal command and control model with highly regulated operational procedures and are constantly engaged with the community at large. Their strong identity leads them to believe they have the skills to succeed in any area within the Department.

The second group (red) does not have the same strong sense of identity. This group exerts control through bureaucracy, being focused on processes rather than outcomes. They provide support to the first group through services such as human resource management, finance, procurement, and have little direct contact with the community at large. They may recognise areas of weakness in their skills and competencies and may accept external assistance to improve these areas.

Case Study #1: (project Hopeful)

The Department's strategic plan was aimed at fulfilling a major government initiative. Project Hopeful was initiated to contribute to the achievement of this initiative and became the department's largest information systems and organisational change endeavour in over 20 years. Hopeful had a non-flexible delivery date imposed by external factors.

During the planning phase, the original project manager recognised that Hopeful was far more complex than he or anyone had realised, and communicated this to the project steering committee. He was replaced by a more experienced project manager from outside the organisation, who immediately

reviewed the project and reported that it would be impossible to deliver the entire scope of the project by the required delivery date. The reaction from the blue members of the steering committee was hostile: the sponsor was a senior blue person who had little experience of project management disciplines and shared the opinion that the project manager should 'just get on with the job'.

The project manager began a campaign to engage several influential steering committee members, drawing on his experience in other organisations and using his professional reputation as leverage. Assured of their support he was able to convince the sponsor of the soundness of the findings of his review and to accept his recommendations. The sponsor thus engaged, supported the recommendations for realistically delivering a reduced set of the functions of the original project to meet the aggressive (and fixed) deadlines. A small number of the (blue) steering committee members regarded any compromise as failure and resigned, believing this perception of failure would taint their status within the organisation.

New steering committee members were appointed from business areas directly impacted by the project, and accepted the role defined by the project manager as executive support essential for the successful outcome of the work. From that time on, with the support of the revitalised steering committee, the project team were able to deliver the essential components of the project within the required timeframe.

Case Study #2 (project Renew)

The Department was implementing a large business re-engineering project in a technical environment to be supported by a specialised information system. Within the department, projects had traditionally been managed by the sponsoring business area, but recently a management decision had been made to have all ICT related projects controlled by the ICT department.

Project Renew was approved and funded, a project manager appointed from outside the Department, and a project steering committee convened. The sponsor of project Renew who was also the chair of the steering committee had some project experience but was mostly focused on business outcomes: he had to manage his 'upwards' stakeholders. The first issue the steering committee members and the project manager had to address was a demand from the leader of the business Subject Matter Expert (SME) team, Robbie, for this project to be handed back to the business. Robbie had developed the original business case and had been expecting to be offered the project management role – a promotion. Based on this history of connection to Renew he insisted that he was the only person who could manage this project and that ICT personnel on the project should report to him.

To resolve this issue and the emerging conflict within the project, the project manager met with Robbie to understand his perspective and expectations. The outcome of this meeting was a recommendation that Robbie be assigned the role of business project manager and be responsible for the organisational change components of the project, but still under the leadership of the project manager. Robbie agreed to this suggestion and it was approved by the steering committee.

The sponsor recognized that Robbie was crucial to the success of the project because of his technical knowledge and commitment to the project, and was initially prepared to accommodate his demands. However, the additional responsibility and recognition did not completely resolve Robbie's issues. His strong sense of 'ownership' of the project meant that his behaviour damaged the cohesion of the project team and undermined the authority of the project manager. The project manager met with the sponsor to seek his support and advice in dealing with this major risk to the success of the project, and to propose some remedial actions. These remedial actions were agreed by the sponsor and then the steering committee at a meeting convened soon after. The committee members had been reluctant to do so, because Robbie was known and respected within the Department; the project manager was able to influence these individuals because he had been working to develop credibility and trustworthiness from the time he was assigned to the project.

Prior to the remedial action commencing, Robbie, sure of his power, made a number of outrageous statements at a steering committee meeting, thus vindicating the project manager's position regarding his disruptive behaviour. Robbie's behaviour was modified through counselling but relationships within the team were severely damaged, causing the project manager constant team management issues that detracted from his focus on leading the team and the steering committee to successful project outcomes.

Case Study Findings

The case studies and the extensive experience of the authors support the theoretical concept that the 'PM should do what it takes' to build the personal relationships and the trust that enables effective communication. The trust created by an effective relationship is critical to:

- Compensate for deficiencies in project governance due to lack of experience, misguided perceptions, and the reception of bad news, by allowing 'upwards mentoring'. The PM needs to be seen as a recognised expert in managing projects.
- Influence the structure, strategy and action of project governance. In the two Cases described here the governance was performed through project steering committees. Case 1 demonstrates the importance of people in the governance structures being involved in the project (having some 'skin in the game'), rather than just being on the board for the 'prestige value'. Case 2 demonstrates the concept of a partnership between the project manager and the sponsor in managing issues that can affect the project's success: a partnership that is built by the PM through steady development of the steering committee's confidence and trust in his or her ability and credibility.
- Assist in developing an understanding of the difference between organisational culture and project culture and the specific needs of the project with reference to project management data and information. Often steering committee members are most receptive to 'command and control' cultures and structures, but this is not a viable management paradigm for project governance where there is not 'one right answer' to most project problems. If the PM has built credibility and trust it is possible to facilitate decision making by offering alternative recommendations and options for action and supporting the techniques of open communication and joint problem solving.

Testing the theory

The building blocks of the robust and trusting relationships identified in the Cases are firstly, the establishment of professional credibility through a 'track record' of project success, proven through timely, accurate and consistent project data. The second building block is the building of social connections and networks, within and around the project environment and the organisation. The credibility of the PM as capable to operate at a senior level is critical to building rapport with senior business managers. Case 1 demonstrates that both the credibility of the PM and his access and use of his networks led to a stronger relationship with his steering committee. Case 2 demonstrates that the credibility of the PM and use of his networks were the foundation that eventually led to the sponsor's support during the protracted phase of Robbie's 'fight to the death' to prevent outside involvement in 'his' project'.

Managing a senior manager's optimistic expectations needs a strong relationship between senior managers and the PM; even with superhuman efforts unrealistic expectations are unlikely to be fulfilled. Consistency, perseverance and determination are important in building respect for the PM's know-how, particularly when communicating bad news, such as in Case 1. The development of stakeholders' perceptions of the PM's personal credibility, wider personal and professional relationships, contacts and networks are all essential elements that go towards building the 'respect'

the PM needs to change senior managers' perceptions. These wider relationships must be built not just 'for the project' but maintained long-term.

Transitioning a person into the sort of PM that can build effective relationships with senior management requires a different focus to the technical skills that probably got the PM promoted into the role. PMs who seek to be successful in today's project and organisational environments need a strong 'right brain' focus, a good 'Emotional Quotient' (EQ) and significant leadership and networking abilities (Bourne and Walker, 2003). Mentoring and support from experienced PMs, either formally within an organisational or professional structure or informally, can help younger people grow and develop. 'Experience' is more often the accumulated learning from one's mistakes; the new PM needs to recognise that mistakes are part of PM learning and growth and if some pain of personal experience can be prevented by learning from the experiences of his/her mentor, that approach should be acknowledged as worthy of merit too.

The culture of the organisation also plays a critical role in tailoring the way relationships work. Both case studies were within an organisation with two strong, and opposed, cultures. PMs assigned from outside the organisation need to take time to assess the organisation's culture and understand the 'players' to appreciate 'who's who and who's playing'. However, whilst 'insiders' understand the culture (or should do) they need to develop the skills needed to be able to 'work the culture' not conform to the culture if it is inappropriate (Bourne and Walker, 2003).

Given the effort needed to build and maintain relationships with senior management, the PM must focus on the people who matter; the *Stakeholder Circle*® framework provides one useful mechanism to help direct effort to right people and whilst not overtly used in the case studies, it has been formally introduced to sections of the organisation since.

In summary, the theory outlined in the first part of the paper can provide a 'road map' or guidance for project managers needing to 'manage upwards'. The additional element is the appropriate personal characteristics of maturity, open-mindedness, practical experience and leadership skills, and a recognition of the importance of building and maintaining relationships both formal and informal. The authors would suggest effective PMs spend 70% to 80% of their time working on relationships through communication: formal and informal meetings, effective reporting on project progress, networking, mentoring and conversation both inside the project and the organisation and outside in the wider business and project management communities.

Synthesis of a new approach to managing upwards

The techniques for managing the expectations of senior stakeholder and managing the behaviours of difficult colleagues (also stakeholders) used by the project managers described in this paper appeared to be instinctive. In reality the approaches were probably partly instinctive and partly developed from experiences from a variety of sources, both business and personal. Many less intuitive or experienced project managers would probably benefit from the application of stakeholder management methodologies and practices such as the *Stakeholder Circle*®. By applying techniques such as those defined by *Stakeholder Circle*®, any project manager can benefit from the structured, stage approach to gathering data about stakeholders leading to targeted communication and building and maintaining robust relationships with key stakeholders.

The concept of stakeholder relationship management maturity (SRMM®) (Bourne, 2008) was developed as a result of observation of how organisations approach implementation of stakeholder management or engagement processes and practices. SRMM®, describes five levels of organisational maturity ranging from level 1 - Ad hoc: some use of processes, through level 3 - Relational: focus on the stakeholders and mutual benefits to level 5 - Predictive: used for health checks and predictive risk assessment and management. The Cases described in this paper define organisations that were probably at the Level 1 stage. Managing senior stakeholders in such an environment is a greater

challenge for PMs than in the environment described by a Level 3 organisation. While more research needs to be done in this area, it is probable that application of SRMM® and *Stakeholder Circle*®, coupled with the guidelines described earlier in this paper will assist PMs approaching the management of senior stakeholders or difficult colleagues.

In referring to the leadership levels defined by Collins (2001), it appears that the leadership actions and relationships developed by the project managers described in this paper were closer to the level 4 type of leadership, and reflect the concept of the PM leading from the front in the same way as organisational culture defines good CEO leadership. The *Stakeholder Circle*® methodology strongly recommends that all decisions about understanding and managing stakeholder expectations should be made with the involvement of members of the project organisation, including team members and sponsor. While the 'level 4' actions and practices of the project managers described in this paper were successful and worthy of emulation, it may be that there is room for even greater achievements if project managers were to discover how to become 'level 5' managers in the frame of Collins (2001). This is also an area that may benefit from research.

Conclusions

This paper defined a roadmap or guidelines to assist PMs manage upwards for successful completion of projects, and assembled data from a number of sources. Data from surveys seeking to understand how managers make the transition from middle management to the ranks of the senior leadership team, or how CEOs emerge from the senior leadership team to lead organisations recognises that each transition requires a major change in behaviour and that the same guidelines apply each time. These guidelines recognise the need to learn from others, to understand and manage the expectations of their stakeholders, and to build and maintain relationships within and around the individual's sphere of influence.

These guidelines are the same for PMs needing to manage their own senior stakeholders. The two case studies described situations often encountered by PMs in organisations when there is a need to deliver bad news to senior stakeholders, or deal with difficult stakeholders whether they are senior stakeholders or colleagues. Through the processes defined in the theoretical sections and developed through the know-how of experienced project managers in the Cases, the approach is the same: develop credibility, build and maintain relationships and recognise that the perspective of the stakeholders comes from their own background, experiences and the organisational culture itself and will most often be based in the command and control school of management. By knowing this and employing the long term approaches described in this paper the PM can often achieve the best result for the project and continue to build personal credibility and respect. Recognising this not only provides a greater chance of success but also prepares the PM for higher levels of responsibility in organisations, should they seek to move out of project management and into business management.

The paper also identified two areas of additional research that may benefit the project management profession: how project managers could apply the concept of stakeholder relationship management maturity to analysing the best approach for managing senior stakeholders in an organisation and secondly, would the concept of 'level 5' leadership have a useful application in 'managing up' in organisations to deliver more consistently successful project outcomes.

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