The Achievement Equation – Personal & Professional Project Management

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Companies seeking to improve productivity usually divide their resources between focusing on building teams or individuals. How effective are team building events in the long run? Sometimes, they're like drinking some high-powered energy drinks. You feel great for a short time period, followed by a hard crash. The team building event goes something like this.

First, you're divided into teams. Next, you're given some goal-oriented task, such as stacking blocks or building towers with Popsicle sticks. This task is completely unrelated to your real world projects and planning processes. You then perform the task under the watchful eyes of the facilitator and/or your manager. At the conclusion, you're asked "What good and bad things did you learn from the experience?" And finally, someone says the famous team building motto, "There's no 'I' in TEAM." Everyone agrees and returns back to the real world.

Unfortunately, the problem, which occurred prior to the team-building event, resurfaces. The same individuals continue to make the same mistakes. These individuals are the "I's" in TEAM. It becomes more evident, that the "I's" (individuals) in TEAM, cause project teams to fail. The better team building motto is probably "You're only as strong as your weakest link." In that light, it's more important to focus on the "I's" in TEAM for projects to be successful.

Looking at TEAM from a different perspective reveals that four to fourteen "I's" are used to construct the word. There are four vertical, straight lines (or I's) used to create the letters T, E, and M.

Exhibit 1 – The I's in Team

Getting really creative, you may count all of the straight lines, regardless of their angle, and find fourteen I's. Without the I's (or individuals), there's no TEAM. Thus, to have a successful project TEAM, you must focus more on building strong individuals rather than building a team with one or more weak links. As a project manager, your roles are to build strong individuals and to facilitate communications between those individuals in order to complete the project.

This paradigm shift is different from what many people were taught in sports about teams, such as football, soccer, and basketball. Instead, think like a track coach. A track coach has a wide variety of talents, disciplines, and personalities on the team. There are sprinters, distance runners, jumpers, and throwers. The coach's work is to build the individual talents; the "I's." It's interesting to note that the team members actually compete against one another at track meets while winning points for the team at the same time. They realize that everyone individually contributes to the total team score. The coaches make sure that the athletes arrive on time at their events and are prepared to participate.

It's possible for athletes to be on the same track team and never communicate with one another. The noted exceptions to this rule are the relays. In the relays, the athletes may train individually. However, they must communicate to pass the baton to the next runner. For experienced sprinters, they'll spend considerably less time learning to pass and receive the baton than they'll spend training for their race. Yet, if they drop the baton (i.e. miss-communicate), they'll lose the race.

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A project team also consists of a wide variety of different talents, disciplines and personalities. There may be technical people, functional staff, clerks, and warehouse workers. They're professionals who know how to perform their tasks. Like the track team, they look to the project manager to inform them about their assignments and the communication process.

All of these individuals may have different reasons for being on the project team. They're individuals first and team members second. In order to get the most out of the team, you must focus on the individuals. What motivates that individual to be on the team? What motivates that person to achieve a goal?

The Achievement Equation concept focuses on building strong individuals. These individuals represent the building blocks of strong teams. There are four components to the Achievement Equation. They were derived from communicating with successful project managers, refugee camp managers, professional athletes, marathon runners, endurance bicyclists, ministers, educators, mountain climbers, and executives. The equation is multiplicative and the components are binary. That's to say that since each component's value is either zero or one, then failure to completely satisfy the requirements yields a value of zero. Furthermore, your answer, regardless of the other components' values will be zero. In mathematical terms, The Achievement Equation is

$$A = G \times M \times P \times E$$

Where G, M, P, and E are binary

Value	Description
A	Achievement
G	Goal setting
M	Motivation
P	Planning
E	Execution

Exhibit 2 – The Achievement Equation & Components

If any of the equation components are not completely implemented, you achieve nothing. Thus, you must completely implement each component to effectively and efficiently reach your goal. These concepts were used to implement a $12 million project for $2.6 million, climb Mt. Everest, and completing exotic marathons in Antarctica, on the Great Wall in China, and in a Kenyan game reserve.

Non-work related, personal accomplishments lead to stronger, confident, and more focused project team members. Recall, when you were a youth and wanted to play outside, you had to complete your homework AND it had to be correct. Since you were passionate about playing, you focused on completing your homework assignment. Your motivation wasn't to get a good grade, but to play outside. We see the same effect when an employee has a scheduled vacation. However, they can't depart until their work is completed and verified. They're highly motivated to complete their assignment, so they can have fun.

This same principle applies to your project team members. A job is something that people have to do in order to survive. No matter how it's packaged, it's still just a job. Few of us have jobs that we're really passionate about. (If you won the lottery, would you continue going to your job?) Thus, I found that encouraging and facilitating my team members to follow their non-work related passions led to more focused and engaging individuals at work. They wanted to complete their work assignments correctly (the first time), so they could pursue their real passions.

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These passions included spending more time with their families, automobile racing, completing degrees, mountain biking, playing music, international travelling, and evangelical or missionary work. Furthermore, the lessons they learned from following their passions were applied at work and created a better environment. For example, during a hot, high altitude, Kenyan marathon, cheetahs and rhinos were roaming freely during the race. The same stress management techniques, which were used during the race, were applied to managing highly visible, multi-million dollar projects at work.

My role, as the IT Director/Sr. Project Manager, was to facilitate communications between the I's (individuals) on the team. My other role was to resolve problems that stood in the way of their speedy progress. Figuratively speaking, I gave the team high performance race cars and all of the responsibility associated with them. They could drive the cars as fast as their talents allowed. My role was to remove the speed bumps on the track.

The goal setting component stresses personal scope identification and management. This, in turn, keeps you focused on the right personal and professional objectives during highly pressured engagements. If you've ever worked on a project in which a team member died or suffered from "burn out", you'll understand the importance of establishing true individual priorities and objectives.

The top priority, whether running 26.2-mile marathons or climbing Mt. Everest, is to live. It's not to finish the race or to reach the summit. About 80% of the Mt. Everest deaths occur on the descent, not on the ascent. This understanding changes the emphasis from reaching the summit to surviving the entire round trip. This same principle applies to managing projects. You need to focus on all aspects of the project, including post-production support and maintenance. And you need to focus on what happens to your team members when the project has concluded.

The Achievement Equation's motivational component emphasizes the importance of understanding an individual's moral compass. What incites you to move, while others are complacent? Or what makes you stay, while others are fleeing? For example, what motivates an underpaid employee, who has highly marketable skills, to come to work and complete a major project with full knowledge that their company may be closed? And they weren't offer a financial incentive by the company. At the same time, other employees were leaving for better, more secure positions.

You must have a moral reason to keep you motivated to achieve your goal. It's also important to note that all people aren't motivated by the same stimulus. In the aforementioned example, money was not a motivating factor for the underpaid, dedicated employee. Project managers must look beyond money to learn what motivates themselves and their team members. Motivators include money, time off from work, awards, better health, adventures/challenges, love, fear, and company recognition. This varies based an individual's personal needs and stage in their life.

For example, the money spent to participate in the Antarctica Marathon did not motivate me to finish the race. If I was injured, such as suffering from frostbite, I was not going to risk losing fingers or toes in order to finish. Money was the very least of my worries. I could always earn more money for another trip, but I couldn't replace my limbs.

Money did not motivate me to keep moving during the race. It was the fear of freezing to death, if I stopped moving. Freezing to death, and not the cost of the trip, was a moral reason to keep moving. What are the moral reasons that will keep you or your team members moving in the right direction, despite challenges to leave the project or performing immoral acts, such as falsely reporting a project's status?

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The Achievement Equation's planning component addresses embracing and managing risk while building self confidence along the way. Many of us are taught to avoid risks. Unfortunately, we tend to avoid risk by ignoring and failing to recognize it. This actually leads to unrealistic project plans and increases project stress. All project risks should be recognized and documented. They may be gathered at special risk assessment meetings, obtained from lessons learned files, and/or while meeting with individuals, such as team members and stakeholders.

After the risks are identified, mitigation plans should be documented. This should include the identifying the triggers, actions to be taken, and the individuals responsible for addressing the risk. Once the risks are addressed, the project team's stress level should decrease. For example, during one project, we included the "beer truck" scenario as a major risk. This is when a key team member gets "hit by a beer truck" at the most critical time of the project and is no longer available. A similar situation occurred on a project. A key team member was deported two weeks before we were scheduled to cutover to a new system. Fortunately, we had planned for this risk and successfully implemented the system without additional stress.

During the Great Wall of China Marathon, we ran on stretches of the wall where the ledges were about five feet wide, with fifty-foot drop offs, and no retaining wall. Unfortunately, runners could pass (and possibly bump) you along those ledges. Kenya's Lewa Safaricom Marathon was held in the Lewa Wildlife Conservatory. Wild animals, including rhinos and cheetahs, roamed freely during the race. We encountered them on the road the day before the race. I was acutely aware of these situations going into both races. I had to develop and be ready to implement my contingency plans for these life-threatening encounters. Developing the plans in advance greatly reduced my anxiety.

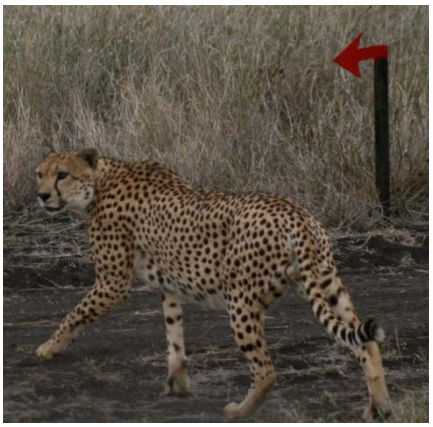

Exhibit 3 – Cheetah on the Marathon Course

The individual goals are identified. The individual is motivated. The plans and risks assessments are completed. The final component of the Achievement Equation is execution. If you have a good project plan, execution appears to be easy. However, it's important to pace yourself and your team members during the project and acknowledge the real half way point.

Although a marathon is 26.2 miles long, many veteran runners consider the 20-mile point to be the half way point, not 13.1 miles. During the first 20 miles, your work effort consists of 80% physical and 20% mental. During the last 6.2 miles, your work effort becomes 80% mental and 20% physical. At this point, your body wants to quit, but your mind is screaming at your body to keep moving. Due to the second phase, runners look for special treats to keep them moving past the pain and to focus on completing the goal. This includes everything from sponges and water showers to candy and cola.

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Like a marathoner, the project team and individuals should not worry about events that they can't control. An experienced marathoner doesn't complain about the weather or the marathon course layout. If they don't like the weather forecast or the number of hills on a course, they don't run it. They'll find a fair-weather marathon or a flat course. However, if they choose to participate, they don't complain. The only factor that you can control is yourself.

On a project, you can't control all of the factors. However, you can control your performance and mental outlook. You control your mental outlook by surrounding yourself with like-minded, highly creative, and motivated individuals. Those people have positive outlooks and a "can do" mentality. In this type of group, a problem situation is considered to be a challenge or an opportunity to excel. On a steep hill during an endurance race, we passed a small sign that read, "Hills build character." And so do challenging problems.

This also applies to addressing problems that occur during the execution phase. If you approach it with the right attitude, you'll make it to the top. One of the secrets behind endurance sports is having the ability to relax and think clearly while your body is under a great amount of stress. Another secret is pacing yourself for the long run. The knowledge gained from these lessons transfers very well to the work environment.

During a project, we needed a developer with specialized functional and technical skills. This person needed to write SQL scripts that reconciled the legacy data with the converted data in the new system. The estimated time, that it would take, was between six to eight work weeks to write the 120+ scripts. Unfortunately, we couldn't locate a person with this skill set at the time we needed them. This created a highly stressful situation on the project.

Just like locating the I's in TEAM, it was matter of looking at the problem through a different lens. By stepping back and analyzing the scripts as a group, instead of individually, a distinct pattern appeared. Using a combination of SQL, MS Excel, and MS Word, about 110 of the scripts were generated in three hours, instead of six to eight weeks. This is an example of thinking creatively under pressure. A skill which was learned and honed in non-work related sports.

Combining the components yields the Achievement Equation.

$$A = G \times M \times P \times E \text{ (where G, M, P, and E are binary)}$$

By combining the four elements, a person can achieve personal and professional goals. And failure to consider any one of the elements means achieving nothing. A simple way to remember the equation components is to think of them as parts of a multi-vitamin supplement. A supplement fills the gap between where you are today and where you want to be in the future.

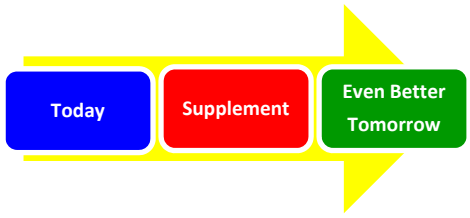

Exhibit 4 – Supplement Diagram

The name of this "achievement supplement" is GOMOPLEX[tm].

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Exhibit 5 - GOMOPLEX^{tm}

To build yourself into a high achiever, take GOMOPLEX^{tm} every day.

References

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Photo Credit

- Reed, A.R. (2007) *Cheetah on the Marathon Course*, Kenya

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