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Eleven Good Reasons for Daily Standups:

A White Paper

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WHITE PAPER

ELEVEN GOOD REASONS FOR DAILY STANDUPS:

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Synopsis

This white paper was originally published in MCL's "Small Business Transition Blog" (https://www.mcl-associates.com/small_business_transition.html) as a multi-part series of five serialized parts that explores why all businesses, all organizations, and all enterprises should consider daily standups as an integral part of their overall project and operational communication planning.

Despite the adoption of the Agile framework globally, having a daily standup seems to have been thrown to the side as a waste of everyone's time. This article asserts the contrary, that maintaining a disciplined daily standup regimen is absolutely necessary from a communication and conflict resolution perspective.

It explores eleven common reasons why projects – and by extension, daily operations – fail, and how daily stand-ups are a necessary first step to achieving overall outcome success.

1. THE DAILY STANDUP

Having a daily standup -- or its virtual equivalent -- is a vital and productive way to start everyone's workday. Whatever framework or business process model your organization has implemented; whether you are technically savvy or not; whether you are a manager or not, whether you work in a small business or a multi-national conglomerate; whether you are working on-site or remotely, a daily standup is a necessary trigger to the efficient and effective communication that human cooperative action demands.

Simply put, a standup meeting is nothing more than a short, time-constrained team status check -- by tradition and realistic professional experience, limited to no more than 10-15 minutes, start to finish -- usually scheduled early each workday.

Only four categories of information are discussed; brevity and conciseness are emphasized. When relevant, the team lead may be obliged to alert members to any general events, leadership issues, or policy directives that impact the entire team. This is followed by a brief and concise report by individual team members on, 1) what tasks the worker accomplished the previous workday; 2). what tasks the worker plans to accomplish today; 3). any issues or constraints that are preventing these tasks or operational responsibilities from moving forward as planned for some iterative goal.

All mumbo-jumbo aside, it is a short, all-hands, daily team briefing.

Any other issues raised during the daily standup should be noted as a side-bar action item that can be discussed separately by the appropriate team members, and any necessary support personnel, or stakeholders.

Operationally, the point is to account for the whereabouts of everyone on the team, to quickly give everyone on the functional or project team situational awareness of the team's activities: which tasks are being worked on, their relative progress, and what problems or constraints are impacting task progress. Once minimal situational awareness has been accomplished, the team members are free to continue to work on their assigned tasks.

In a very short period of time, a lot has been accomplished. A lot has been communicated.

Looking back, it is clear to me that my own practice of holding daily standup meetings derives from my experience as a young Fleet Sailor in the United States Navy. Each morning -- on whichever ship I was serving—the "OI" (Operations and Information) Division assembled together at, "Quarters for Muster, Instruction and Inspection", abbreviated to "morning quarters", or more simply "quarters".

To say that this practice is not normally implemented in the civilian world is an understatement. And that is a shame.

From a management and leadership perspective -- when done correctly and consistently -- a daily standup meeting is the single most efficient and effective communication technique in the management bag of tricks. It is the single most efficient and effective communication technique in the leadership bag of tricks. It is the single most efficient and effective method for organizing quick team response to fast-moving, changing circumstances. It is the foundation for developing team cohesiveness and performance metrics. It is the foundation for developing dispute resolution and Win-Win negotiation skill sets.

Unfortunately, you will find no specific reference to such a technique anywhere in the Project Management Institute's Project Book of Knowledge (PMBOK)…With the exception of Agile, you will find no specific reference to such a technique in any other process framework or business process model…You will find no specific reference to such a technique in any Masters of Business Administration curricula…You will find no specific reference to such a technique in any Organizational Policy or Employee Handbook.

For the vast portion of my now five decades of professional life -- with some notably delightful exceptions -- I have experienced a plethora of poor managers…and even poorer leaders. These have been occasionally punctuated by absolute nightmare frontline supervisors and mid-level managers who seemed to have verged on the edge of sociopathic.

Wherever I am managing or leading a team, I make sure that a daily standup is held. Whenever I am in support, where no daily standup exists, I make sure, in some way, to alert my Direct Report of my whereabouts, what I accomplished the previous work day, what I am working on today, and any constraints I am facing. I keep track of my daily activities, whether the submission of a weekly report is required or not, to aid both my own memory and to act as a contemporaneous historical reference.

In part this is just simple prudence; letting your boss know what you are doing before she asks you where you have been, after a half-hour spent trying to chase you down on some five-alarm fire that has just landed on her desk, can earn your trust and save you heaps of heartaches. A customer asking for an accounting of a series of inter-connected events that occurred several weeks in the past go more smoothly if it doesn't require several hours of intense historical reconstruction.

But to a greater degree, it is one of the ways I try to "manage up". My hope is that by providing these few bits of daily information, I will provide an example…perhaps even to successfully plant a small seed.

While there is nothing you can do with sociopaths other than to remove yourself from the situation as quickly as possible. I believe that those communication skills commonly referred to as "soft skills", are the keys to both management and leadership success. I believe they can be passed on to those who are able and willing to listen. If I am lucky, perhaps some will improve upon them; perhaps, too, they will pass these skills on to the next generation.

Many of these skills were passed onto me by those few exceptional managers and leaders who took the time to mentor me, and the much greater number of the others who simply failed to "toe the mark" in comparison. After decades of cumulative, random examples, I am satisfied that the missing variables that distinguish the former from the latter fall into two areas: 1). the ability to communicate efficiently and effectively, and 2). the ability to identify and successfully resolve internal and external conflicts.

Efficient and effective communication is the ability to send information, verify its receipt by the intended recipient, and validation that the recipient actually understands the intent and context of that information. The sender does not know if the information has been received until its successful delivery is acknowledged by the recipient. The sender does not know if the communication is understood until some form of recipient validation is received by the sender, often in the form of some subsequent corroborating action or behavior.

Identifying and successfully resolving internal and external conflicts is the ability to use those communication skills to produce Win-Win (Fischer & Ury, 1991) outcomes when interpersonal, role, and power issues and conflicts impede project and operational success.

It is these skills that are most important to project and operational success, and the least addressed in the overall business and IT community. The purpose of this article is to redress this oversight, and -- hopefully -- to narrow an overly broad discussion to these two variables that matter most.

2. THE AGILE FRAMEWORK

As outlined in the official history of the Agile Manifesto (agilemanifesto.org_1):

> *"On February 11-13, 2001, at The Lodge at Snowbird ski resort in the Wasatch mountains of Utah, seventeen people met to talk, ski, relax, and try to find common ground—and of course, to eat. What emerged was the Agile 'Software Development' Manifesto. Representatives from Extreme Programming, SCRUM, DSDM, Adaptive Software Development, Crystal, Feature-Driven Development, Pragmatic Programming, and others sympathetic to the need for an alternative to documentation driven, heavyweight software development processes convene."*

In the two decades since the publication of the Agile Manifesto (agilemanifesto.org_2, 2001), the Agile framework has been applied to all sorts of business processes, technical and non-technical, project efforts, and ongoing operations. The backbone of that process is the daily "scrum".

When it comes right down to it, the Agile framework is all about efficient and effective communication, followed up by efficient and effective implementation, which often requires additional efficient and effective communication, throughout. It is a modified example of the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle.

I am a big fan of daily standup team meetings. Therefore, it should not be surprising that I am a big fan of Agile. As far back as the early 2000s when I was first exposed to a book written by one of the original manifesto signatories, Kent Beck. Beck's book, "Xtreme Programming" (1999), the whole idea of creating a "new discipline of development" (Beck, p. 5) organized and clarified many of the issues I had noticed as a database developer, business analyst, and project manager.

Since that time, Agile has attained the status as the next new bright, shiny object in the never-ending pantheon of IT and Quality Management delights. It follows previous bright shiny objects of TQM, ISO 9000 and 9001, Six Sigma, CMM, CMMI, etc. The Agile framework has been applied to all sorts of business processes, technical and non-technical, project efforts, and ongoing operations.

Yet -- after over two decades -- there is still no empirical evidence available that objectively demonstrates that Agile -- or SAFe, its enterprise, steroid equivalent -- is more efficient or effective than any other framework being used today. Despite reported DevOps successes like the influential book, “Accelerate” (Forsgren, Humble, & Kim, 2018) there is no confirmed data to justify a conclusion that Agile or SAFe can increase productivity when applied to non-DevOps procedures, by itself.

For the purposes of this article, I will refrain as much as possible from referring specifically to Agile terminology: e.g., “scrum”. “Daily standup” should be taken as its equivalent for Agile purists. Communication is all about context. Technical terms are useful when talking to other knowledgeable professionals in a specific field. When used in the context of a mixed audience -- technical professionals and those who are not -- it is just an ego-driven way of excluding some from participation.

As reported in a November 2021 article entitled, “The Standish Group Reports 83.9% of IT Projects Fail -- How to Save Yours” (Opendoor Technology), only 16.2% of IT projects were reported as having been completed on time and on budget. 52.7% of the reported projects were “challenged”, i.e., projects declared to have been completed and approved, but whose outcomes were either late, over budget, and had fewer features and functions than originally specified. The remaining report projects (31.1%), were considered to be complete failures, projects either abandoned altogether or canceled.

Without splitting hairs to what extent, a “challenged” project might be declared a “success” to save one’s professional career or to justify continued budget funding, let us minimally agree that project continuity and success -- and by extension operational continuity and success -- still has a long way to go.

The opendoor.com article cites ten factors contributing to projects failing to achieve complete success: 1). Incomplete Requirements, 2). Lack of user involvement, 3). Lack of resources, 4). Unrealistic expectations, 5). Lack of executive support, 6). Changing Requirements and Specifications, 7). Lack of planning, 8). Didn’t need it any longer, 9). Lack of IT management, and 10).Technical illiteracy. I would add an eleventh contributing factor: failure to keep pace with the increasing velocity of change.

Contrary to what many marketing professionals and business management consultants strongly imply, you cannot just go out and buy a miracle. Having the right sort of fairy dust in hand, you cannot just sprinkle it about and make all of your project and operational problems disappear.

My own professional experience -- and the anecdotal evidence collected in informal chats with other process professionals -- leads me to believe that most frameworks -- including Agile -- are quickly adopted in various hybrid proofs of concept efforts, and just as quickly abandoned or left to die at the side of the road when stove pipe short-cuts are more convenient.

The opendoor.com article does not mention poor communication or a lack of accurate and timely information as a contributing factor, neither is internal and external conflict resolution.

Not surprisingly, that seems more than a little odd to me.

3. COMMUNICATION

There is no lack of opinions as to why and how organizations should communicate internally. Some (Second Rise LLC, 2022) have proposed communication models based on content. This strikes me as being an unwieldy approach; communication content comes in hundreds -- if not thousands -- of varieties and formats. RingCentral (2022) has proposed a communication model based upon outcome purpose, rather than content. From a model building perspective, categories should be kept as simple as possible. Four of the Ring Central categories make sense to me: 1) Decision meetings, 2).Discussion meetings, 3). Information-sharing meetings, and 4). Check-in meetings.

The fifth identified meeting type, “in-the-moment-meetings”, seems to miss the mark by a long way. While a substantial amount of important information is communicated informally and “in-the-moment”, it does not meet the standard of outcome purpose. Conceivably, an “in-the-moment” meeting could meet the requirements of, making a decision or discussing an issue, sharing information, or a status check; whether these take place in a hallway, over a video conference or telephone line, or in a formal conference room makes little difference to its ultimate purpose.

A more fitting category would be “collaborative work meeting”, where a group of individuals work together -- exchanging information and mutually solving related task issues and problems -- for the purpose of achieving a common, specified short-term goal or output.

These collaborative work meetings may either be formal or informal. They may have an agenda or no agenda. They ordinarily produce some sort of artifact: a record or summary of the work effort’s progress, and any action items its members have agreed to perform in the future. These artifacts are normal business standards of operations, conducted -- if for no reason -- than to justify work progress, establish a historical record, or just to validate in writing that everyone involved is in agreement. They comprise the vast majority of all business activities. They require cooperation, and they require clear, concise two-way communication.

This, in fact, is where the real work gets done every day. It is these collaborative activities -- when done correctly -- that actually produce value. They include both facilitated and non-facilitated discussions: quality assurance activities, action planning sessions, brainstorming, group reviews, Joint documentation activities, and any other business activities that require individuals to actively cooperate with one another.

Efficient and effective communication -- having the cognitive and physical ability to clearly, accurately, and succinctly get your ideas, facts, and concepts across to your audience, and your own cognitive ability to listen, understand, and take action on what other people may communicate back to you in response -- is universally acknowledged to be the most important factor in the success or failure of virtually every social human endeavor.

4. PROJECT AND OPERATIONAL FAILURE

A brief exercise in how a lack of efficient and effective communication might underpin the eleven contributing factors to project and -- by extension -- operational failure seems to be a worthwhile discussion to consider;

- **Incomplete Requirements** can occur when key stakeholders are excluded or conversely when the wrong stakeholders are included. It can also occur when too many stakeholders are included. I once had a prospective customer propose that 40 individuals would participate in a single, one-hour requirement gathering session. As gently as I could, I proposed the possibility that perhaps the project’s scope might need to be focused much more narrowly.

  Similarly, by misidentifying key stakeholders, accurate communication is obviously affected: requirements are ambiguous, incomplete, conflicting, infeasible, or worse unverifiable. Project assumptions are easy to miss, precisely because they are assumptions: easy to go undocumented, adequately validated, or remediated.

- **Lack of user involvement** dovetails nicely with the issue of incomplete requirements. In addition to someone who should be included in the project being left out -- either deliberately or by oversight -- quite frequently individuals just refused to cooperate. For whatever reason, the project is not at the top of their priority list.

  The rationale for non-cooperation is often framed as either a lack of time or continuing competing priorities that preclude participation. While there are obvious instances where this might be true on a short-term situational basis, generally I adhere to my father’s enjoiner to pay attention to what others do, not to what they say.

When non-cooperators are forced to participate, their contribution is often half-hearted, resulting in mediocre contributions to the overall effort.

Sometimes noncooperation is just a matter of misunderstood priorities. Sometimes, it is in reaction to being the “loser” in some internal power struggle, or a deep disagreement about either policy, substance, or method. Where non-cooperation is active and deliberately obstructive, escalation to a higher authority is invariably required. Remediation -- if it actually occurs -- always takes time and often involves some sort of conflict resolution or project scope correction.

- **Lack of resources** is the proverbial and convenient excuse to explain away the failure to do some action or achieve some goal.

  In an odd twist, when we have plenty of everything, most of us tend to waste what we have. Unlimited budgets are the stuff of fiction. There is almost always some lack of resources that needs to be dealt with. Yet, there are some who always find a way to maximize what they have. Somehow, they find a way to get acceptable results.

  One of my favorite quotes on leadership comes from Colin Powell’s (2003) Leadership Lecture entitled, “Why Leadership Matters in the Department of State”:

  > *“My own personal definition is that leadership is the art of getting people to do more than the science of management says is possible. There are lots of variations and corollaries on that. Good leadership is getting people to do a lot more than the science of management says. If the science of management says that the capacity of this organization is at 100 percent, good leaders take it to 110 percent.”*

  Despite differences in leadership style, true leaders -- and in my book that includes frontline workers and other “non-supervisors” -- almost always find some way to get the job done, or to successfully reframe the problem to their leadership so that what they believe should be done becomes obvious.

- **Unrealistic expectations** are pandemic in work environments where no disagreement is allowed, and contrarily where few professional standards are maintained.
  We are talking, here, about employment: the hiring of a person to produce a good or service in exchange for compensated payment.

  Excluding Montana and military service, in the United States employment relationships are governed by the “Employment-at-will Doctrine”, as interpreted and governed by the laws of each of the individual states. But generally, employment is defined as a fiduciary relationship that spans an indefinite period of time that can be terminated by either party without notice.

  Individuals -- unless they believe that they have few good options -- will be attracted to a job because of its compensation, but they will not stay long in a work environment where they do not look forward to some aspect of their daily routine. And if they do stay, they will do everything in their power to cut corners, shift blame, and generally be as unproductive as possible.

  To get work accomplished, even on a small scale, requires leadership.

  As already noted, leadership is a nuanced, highly individualistic skill set. While management by terror or bullying may serve a manager well over the short-term, sooner or later there will be the inevitable reckoning. Alternatively, providing no bounds or expectations of deportment, productivity, or quality standards is not leadership at all, but rather a laissez-faire abdication of responsibility.

  The World War Two, the US Army Chief of Staff, and later Secretary of State, George C. Marshall believed that disagreement, not enforced concord, is essential to the final phase of decision-making.

In his biography of Omar Bradley (2008, p. 66), Alan Axelrod notes that Marshall believed that, a commander did not solicit the advice of others in order to formulate his own decision, but rather used their advice to test a decision already made. He quotes Marshall saying:

> *'Unless I hear all the arguments for or against an action I am about to take, I don't know whether or not I'm right. If I hear all the arguments against some action and still find in favor of it, I'm sure* I'm right."

When managers, customers, and leaders demand absolute silence or agreement from their subordinates or vendors, they shirk the responsibility of leadership. It is difficult to challenge authority without -- at the very least -- the implicit permission to do so. The verdicts of those who hold authority over each of us can affect our education, our careers, and ultimately who and what we judge ourselves to be.

On the other hand, when unrealistic expectations are allowed to waterfall downward through the organization unchallenged, all who failed to present contrary views in opposition are culpable. Of course, contrary views require truth to power.

- **Lack of executive support** is pretty hard to understand. Why would a member of the executive or a senior manager agree to fund and provide resources to a project, and then fail to support it?

  It is important to keep in mind the rhetorical question: who is most likely to complain about the lack of executive support? All would agree that it is not the executives complaining about themselves; it is a subordinate complaining about their supervisor. Perhaps that complaint is justified, and perhaps it is not.

  There is a popular -- and admittedly seductive -- parable popularized by the publication of the Peter Principle (Peter and Hull) in 1986), that individuals working in hierarchies tend to continue to rise in the organization until they reach their level of incompetence.

  With all due respect to Occam's Razor, this is a simplistic explanation for a very complex and dynamic "science of management" problem. It presumes that all organizations -- regardless of size, organizational structure, corporate culture, ever-changing group dynamics, and circumstances -- operate in exactly the same way, every single time. We know this assumption to be untrue, else all successful CEOs who have been lured away from their parent company to lead another would always succeed in their new role.

  But one thing that we do know about hierarchies is that the higher you go, the more meetings you are expected to attend. Another thing we know -- and as noted by Porter and Baker (2006), despite mutual finger-pointing and "I'm not the problem" protestations -- most meetings are not run well.

  While it is admittedly anecdotal, my own experiences as a consultant and contractor support this conclusion, despite my own efforts to suggest changes in this most important business activity.

  Overly complex communication plans are as bad as no communication plan at all. Moreover, most businesses have no formal practices surrounding the responsibilities of executive project sponsorship. Unsurprisingly, there is no Standard Operating Procedure for the role and responsibilities of the Project Sponsor. In many instances, the role does not even exist.

  The Sponsor's role is essentially to be an effective link between the executive level and the project team and to manage the expectations of the project stakeholders. While their role does not include attending regular project meetings, and certainly not micromanaging the project team, it does not imply taking a hands-off approach to the project or its frontline workers.

Though not a formal role responsibility, an attentive Project Sponsor should take the time to informally collect qualitative team data using the practice of, “Managing by Wandering Around” (MBWA). It is also referred to as “Walking the Halls”, or what I prefer to call, “The Manager’s Walkabout” (MCL & Associates, 2022). This is an important management technique that has, unfortunately, fallen out of favor long before geographically dispersed teams and virtual meetings became an everyday reality.

At its heart, leadership is about the development of accurate communication and trust. Many executives and managers could greatly benefit from developing better leadership skills to support their management responsibilities.

- **Changing Requirements and Specifications** are a given for any project. The goal for all project management frameworks is to minimize the amount of work expended on requirement and specification changes and still deliver an end product, on time and on budget, that is fit for purpose. What makes Agile unique from Waterfall is that change is assumed; the customer may have a very clear idea of what they want, but a very unclear notion of what will be required to get there, or how much time and resources it will require to get there.

  Requirements and specifications can change for any number of reasons: 1). a requirement, or a set of requirements, get overlooked; 2). a shift in market or customer demand occurs; 3). organizational policy changes or internal politics; 4). Changes in Laws and regulations; and 5). identification of bugs or defects.

  There are things that are realistically within the scope of management control and there are things that are not. When everything is said and done, the issue comes down to early detection and prioritization of tasks and issue focus.

  As already addressed, overlooking requirements can be mitigated by including all relevant stakeholders to the table. While leadership may not be in a position to influence either customer demand, or a change in laws and regulations, they can certainly anticipate such changes through risk mitigation strategies and processes. Organizational policy changes and internal political conflicts can be dealt with through a variety of conflict resolution and informal facilitation efforts. Bug defects can be mitigated by better quality assurance and customer service processes.

  All require effective and efficient internal communication pathways.

- **Lack of planning**, or to rephrase it, the abundance of poor planning -- like every other challenge to project success -- is a symptom of hidden underlying conditions.

  Somehow the Agile approach has been elevated to yet another panacea that will solve all management production and project management problems, much as all the other IT “flavor-of-the-month” cure-alls that proceeded it. The Agile admonition that working software -- i.e., working on the software problem at hand -- should be emphasized over comprehensive documentation has been interpreted as meaning little or no documentation, including planning.

  Without getting into a far-flung debate over how much documentation is enough, the whole point of Agile is to produce a minimally viable product in the shortest possible time, regardless of whether or not that effort continues to produce further versions into the future.

  This requires planning. And planning always requires communication.

  Since most of us are not lucky enough to have been born with eidetic memory, often these planning details need to be codified in written form for us to refer to. Initial planning details often need to be reassessed and revised due to changing circumstances and constraints. As a consequence, many of these artifacts may need to be versioned-controlled as living documents. Moreover, virtually all business efforts are subject to legal duties of one sort or another. Prudent documentation is always required to support critical decisions, as well as the various legal and fiduciary responsibilities of management.

The issue is not whether documentation is necessary, but rather how much documentation is absolutely required to satisfy all appropriate communication needs.

As already noted, frequently the necessary technical and functional resources are not assigned during the planning phase, but rather after planning has already been completed. Often the scope is either undefined or over-defined, and therefore realistically unachievable. It is not uncommon for the planning cycle to be subject to executive micromanaging and excessive reporting.

Communication plans often follow hierarchical top-down and bottom-up patterns, where the flow of information is as stylized and rigid as Kabuki Theatre.

From a management perspective, there is a downside to implementing the Agile framework approach: it requires active -- rather than passive -- management participation and leadership. Both product owners and stakeholders must have daily situational awareness if they hope to support the teams under their leadership. They must be prepared to manage and lead at the same tempo as their hard-working teams.

No longer are delays to discussing and removing impediments to project and operational bottlenecks to the next regularly scheduled management meeting acceptable. Problem-solving deferred invariably results in progress delayed, and frequently exponential problem exacerbation. When such occurrences are recurrent, or go unresolved – as they frequently do – is it any wonder that so many projects fail, or why so many operational processes remain profoundly broken?

There are many frameworks to choose from. But none will prove to be adequately efficient or effective unless management is prepared and able to match the efficiency and effectiveness exhibited by their teams with efficiency and effectiveness of their own. Both management and leadership require efficient and effective communications.

- **Didn’t need it any longer** denotes an unambiguous alarm that a project has gone awry in an extraordinarily significant way. Resources have been marshaled, money has been spent, and operational plans have been made. And now the product on which all of these efforts have been based is suddenly no longer needed?

  It is the ultimate tacit acknowledgment of, “we quit; we are moving on to some other alternative”.

  Often the lowest manager on the totem pole gets the blame. But everyone who has any sense at all about how organizational decisions are made understands that the Executive-layer has been asleep at the switch.

- **Lack of IT management** and **technical illiteracy** fall within a similar category.

  As noted by Masli, et al. (September 2016, p. 689): *“A fundamental aspect of organization hierarchy design involves the apportioning of managerial responsibilities between a superior and a subordinate”.*

  The paper goes on to point out that splitting or delegating responsibilities without obtaining a superior’s approval creates three potential risks:

  1. Concerted oversight of a subordinate can be difficult and time-consuming, particularly when “*information asymmetries*” are present;
  2. Delegation increases the likelihood of organizational politics and personal relationships skewing the decision-making process, and;
  3. Where a subordinate perceives a superior to be unfair in some way, it can “negatively shape subordinate behaviors”.

There will always be information asymmetries. Even individuals who have taken the exact same professional pathway, who are of the same generation, and have roughly similar belief systems, inevitably, will view things from a different perspective. If only from the perspective that one is superior in authority in relation to the other.

The superior wants a specific outcome delivered or accomplished, within a specific period of time. The subordinate has to figure out how to successfully make that happen.

Even when requirements have been well-documented, communication is required to equalize and fill in the gaps of task information and executive intent. Predictably, there will be some degree of asymmetry in technological knowledge. Both the executive and the subordinate need to have a solid grounding in some area of technology that will allow them to ask the right questions of the other, and of the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and Stakeholders that will necessarily participate.

A worst-case scenario that comes to mind is the National Security Agency’s (NSA) 2001 Trailblazer Project which “consumed $1.2 Billion of the agency's budget…and it had proved to be a disaster. A fount of corporate mismanagement, cost overruns, and more to the point...conceptual wrongheadedness” (2016, p. 156).

Organizational politics and personal relationships are a given because they involve competing roles and responsibilities, as well as competition over scarce resources and budgets. Frequently these decisions are “career breaking / career-making” because operational changes are a consequence, along with a significant commitment of organizational budget and resources. If the project is a success the executive is a hero; if the project is a failure the executive -- or the individual otherwise held to be accountable -- is a pariah

If the executive is viewed as acting in an unfair way, subordinates are likely to be hesitant to bring bad news or present contrary points of view forward. Decision-makers looking for easy technical solutions that they can manage with ease have an unrealistic view of their role and responsibilities.

- **Keeping pace with change** is absolutely essential for any modern human enterprise.

  Where change was once marked by the passage of millenniums and centuries, due to the ever-increasing pace of technological change, its rapidity can now be measured in scant years, if not months and weeks. Some applications are changed and updated in hours.

  For most of humanity, change is not only personally unavoidable, it is often both personally and socially disruptive. Each day brings new challenges that must be faced, and new solutions must be found and implemented. In turn, this triggers the impetus for cultural change: the deliberate effort by some group of individuals to adjust to external circumstances and challenges impacting their lives.

5. CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION

Cultural change, by itself, is neither good nor bad; it is a reaction. It is how humans are hard-wired by the DNA we share in common. From a sociological perspective, it allows the group to adapt to changes in their external environment, and to solve new problems that require individual and group action in cooperation and coordination with others, both internally and externally.

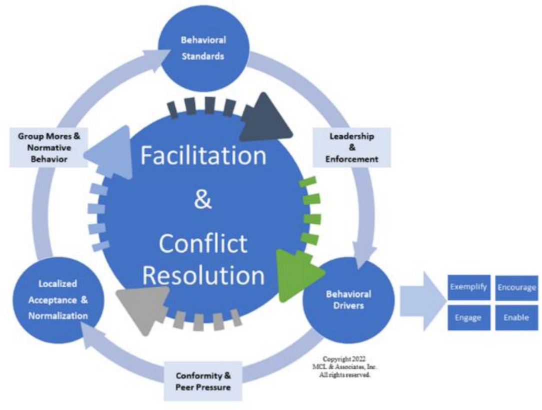

Figure 1: The Cultural Change Process

Initially, cultural change is always an internal challenge to the group's status quo by an individual, or group of individuals, within the group. The challenge is in response to some change or condition that demands action that cannot be satisfied or resolved within the current status quo structure. Whether initiated by formal leadership or internal thought leaders, the response always leads to conflict and -- if not adequately resolved -- escalating conflict behavior.

By one means or another, the change that is sought is brought to the attention of a sub-group of the whole. If received positively, it will be considered, exemplified, encouraged, engaged, and enabled. If negatively received, it will be ignored, mocked, rejected, or punished. Most attempts to change or modify culture will result in both positive and negative responses within the group. Invariably, this leads to internal conflicts that may in turn lead to external conflicts.

It is the conflict generated by cultural change that makes it problematic. In a truly ironic dichotomy of complementary opposites, humans are equally resistant to change, as well as having the innate ability to adapt to change. To quote Shakespeare's "Hamlet", "there's the rub"; to adapt to change it is necessary to initiate internal change at the appropriate interface points. Initiating internal change often creates both internal and external conflict that demands resolution.

Most managers -- most individuals -- are ill prepared to deal positively with conflict in the work place because so much of it is covered by employment law and multiple strata of hierarchal authority. Almost any organizational friction that escalates beyond a "tolerable level" can easily fall under the very large umbrella of Human Resources. Ultimately, a very complex and expensive process, regardless of outcome.

To resolve these issues before they escalate into something disruptive and dysfunctional, facilitation is required.

Facilitation is nothing more than a deliberative, cross-communication process guided by a third-party, preferably a neutral third party; someone who has no stake in the conflict's eventual outcome, other than a Win-Win solution for all. Short of that outcome, a negotiated agreement by all parties to take joint action that will further clarify the options to move forward together. And short of those outcomes, a negotiated agreement by all parties to refrain from any action that will prevent the parties from moving forward separately.

Cultural change, and the inevitable generation of interpersonal, role, and resource conflicts that often result, are always best resolved at the lowest level possible. It is always best to resolve conflicts well before they become project and operational impediments. Before they become section and departmental food fights. Before they come to the attention of high-level leadership, and certainly well before they require the intercession of human resources and legal action. Matters of law are about advocacy and winning. Dispute resolution and facilitation are all about controlled communication flow, discovering areas of mutual need, and negotiating an agreement framework where all sides feel that they have gained enough of what they require to move forward.

This requires more than a one-size fits-all approach. Individuals, the various groups they belong to, their institutions, and their situations are different, if for no other reason than shifting circumstances and fluctuating context. Groups within same organization often have very different work cultures and subcultures. What worked with one group may not work with another. What worked in one situation may not work in one that appears to be similar.

Fortunately, much of the basic thinking and codification of conflict analysis and dispute resolution techniques have been crafted and tested over the past half century. It is well past time when these basics models and techniques be acknowledged as basic every day skill sets that ought to be taught, practiced, and encouraged as an industry best practice by all.

For an abundance of social and business reasons, we need to finally start the movement away from merely managing interpersonal and group conflicts, and start the much more efficient and effective task of actually trying to resolve them.

6. WHY DAILY STANDUPS MATTER

When everything is said and done, groups and organizations accomplish common goals through cooperation and communication. Communication can be accurate or inaccurate. Depending on the circumstances, the roles and responsibilities involved, and the context, any combination of communication, miscommunication, or lack of adequate communication can often create both internal and external social conflict. Where, when, and how the conflict presents itself, and the issues and the parties involved, will determine on how the conflict should be approached.

The phrase “conflict management” has a specific meaning in the lexicon of conflict theory. It refers to processes that have proven to be efficient and effective in bringing a conflict to a truncated end; where the details of how and why the conflict has been concluded are often less important than the fact that it has been curtailed. Within the context of business disputes, a lawsuit is the domestic equivalent of warfare. Walking away from conflict despite a specific party’s strong feelings of aggrievement is the domestic equivalent of surrender. Of course, in both cases, the conflict may be “managed” though accommodation, avoidance, compromise, or tacit collaboration, but in many instances, its underlying causes remain unresolved.

Under such circumstances, a rekindling of the underlying conflict between the parties is likely.

Depending on circumstances, the phrase “external conflict” can have two meanings: either a conflict with another individual or group within the organization, or a conflict with another individual or group from outside the organization.

Whether you call it a standup, a daily standup meeting, a daily scrum, a scrum meeting, or even a morning roll call, the modern purpose of this event is generally the same: to periodically convene a brief meeting at the beginning of the workday to establish who is available to do work, to review the status of efforts from the previous day, to review the current day’s activities, and to seek assistance in the removal of any constraints that impact the timely completion of those tasks.

There has been considerable complaint about daily standups being more dysfunctional than functional. Complaints abound that it is a waste of time, arguing that its only purpose is to make managers feel the team members are working hard and under their control, rather than provide actionable insight into how well the team is progressing against their short-term goal.

I disagree with those assessments. Rather, it suggests a failure to adequately communicate the purpose of standup meetings to the team, or to its newest members. It is a leadership issue.

If a daily stand up takes more than fifteen minutes to accomplish, either the team is too large, or the incorrect kinds of information is being shared. As illustrated in Figure 2 -- barring technical difficulties and with a five-minute cushion to allow managers to get to or to dial into their next higher tier daily standup -- the entire upward communication path, from the teams to Leadership, can be accomplished within a time duration of an hour-and-a-half and two hours; with no individual needing to spend more than a half-hour of their time in the entire daily process.

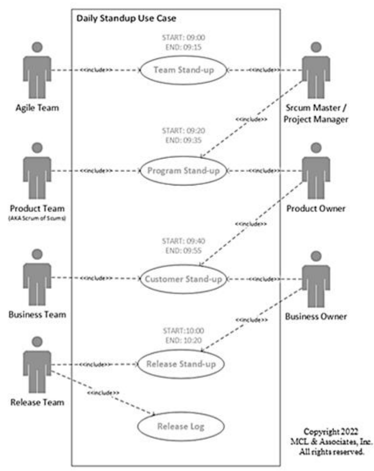

Figure 2: Daily Standup Use Case

One need only consider the amount time and resources wasted in the various daily combinations of communication, miscommunication, lack of adequate communication, and unnecessary conflict Daily standups are a small price to pay for clarity.

The purpose of a daily standup is not task status. Rather it is problem identification, constraint identification, and the status and initiation of action items and remediation efforts to clear bottlenecks and. Task status can easily be updated by utilizing a team Kanban. Daily work status and progress updates can be maintained by updating individual task progress at the end of the workday, available for a quick pre-meeting review by each successive tier lead.

It is not uncommon for a standup to take far less than the allotted fifteen minutes to accomplish, with individual reports taking far less than a single minute to complete. This leaves a sizable portion of the allotted time to focus on the real purpose of the daily standup: workflow issues, shifts in priorities, and the removal of constraints by managers and leads.

Constraints generally mean that groups of individuals are not, cannot, or will not work together cooperatively. This leads, inevitably, to conflict.

If there are no issues to discuss, it will be a short meeting. If issues do exist, then collaborative work meetings can be quickly scheduled to discuss and assign individual action items, trigger communication flows for information and clarifications, and always to keep in the forefront that projects and operations ultimately fail because of people, no technology.

7. CONCLUSION

So long as humans make decisions about key pathway choices that impact internal and external processes, communication and the likelihood of escalating human conflict will continue to be relevant to business operational and project success.

Each of the eleven factors contributing to project failure require efficient and effective daily communication. Its purpose should be to detect and report any issues or constraints that are preventing tasks or operational responsibilities from moving forward as planned.

One of the weaknesses of current process improvement theory and implementation is that it completely ignores the human element; it tends to treat individuals as replaceable parts in a larger machine. This is a typical managerial, top-down, tunnel-vision perspective that leave line-supervisors and managers -- who eventually become executives -- completely unprepared to be either efficient managers or effective leaders. When implemented at all, communication and conflict resolution tend to be mechanical and uninspired.

Communication between individual teams, and collaborative team networks need to be dynamic and proactive. Short, focused daily standup meetings for all is a necessary first-step toward that end.

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