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The Question Every Project Team Should Answer

By Karen A. Brown, Nancy Lea Hyer and Richard Ettenson

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Many projects fail because they are launched without a clearly articulated reason why they're being pursued. Exploring the four dimensions of a compelling "*why* statement" can improve a project's chances of success.

BY KAREN A. BROWN, NANCY LEA HYER AND RICHARD ETTENSON

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THE LEADING QUESTION
How can asking *why* before you begin a project raise its chances of success?

FINDINGS

▶ In many corporate projects, team members can't explain the point of what they are doing — and that increases the likelihood of failure.

▶ Without a solid "*why* statement," a project team can become overwhelmed by conflict and confusion.

▶ To craft a useful *why* statement, identify what the problem is, where and when it occurs and how big it is.

CAN YOU AND YOUR TEAM members articulate in a few short sentences the underlying reason that brought your project into existence? If you can't, you're not alone: We have observed that in many corporate projects, team members cannot explain the point of what they are doing — and as a result, their projects are likely to fail.

When a project fails to achieve its objective, observers frequently chalk it up to politics, poor planning and weak execution.[1] Our experience as embedded observers with several hundred teams in more than 50 organizations has taught us that these factors often flow from an initial omission. Whenever we observe a project team in trouble — frustrated, laden with conflict and struggling to deliver results — we ask members to articulate what compelled their project into existence in the first place. To our continuing surprise, we often discover these teams have not even discussed, let alone agreed on, why they are pursuing the project.

Not being able to articulate why the project is being done puts it at risk of losing support and momentum and decreases its chances of success.[2] The lack of a clear and compelling "*why* statement" leaves a project with a blurred focus, and the initiative with a weak internal and external project brand — that is, a poor or questionable reputation both within the organization and with its external stakeholders.

As we emphasized in a 2011 *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, "Why Every Project Needs a Brand (and How to Create One)," strong project branding can help build momentum for project engagement and support.[3] In this article, we argue that the best way to begin building that project brand is with a well-articulated, problem-focused *why* statement. The *why*

statement serves as a useful tool that aligns the efforts of team members, leaders and other stakeholders, and it helps maintain support through all five project branding phases, from pitch to payoff. (See "How *Why* Statements Influence the Five Stages of Project Branding.")

Why Care About *Why*? A global consumer electronics company spent millions on a cutting-edge automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS) to handle the burgeoning finished-goods inventory in its North American distribution center. The project was completed on schedule and within budget, but with a serious downside:[4] Although technically impressive, the new ASRS actually made the inventory problem worse, because it encouraged accumulation of even more inventory and hid it from view. Project leaders and team members had succumbed to a common trap in project management. They had lost sight of the original problem, settled on a misguided solution — and then pursued it with vigor.

The ASRS story provides a cautionary tale for project leaders: A project without a clear and compelling *why* can lead to wasted effort, missed project objectives, dissatisfied clients, poor business performance, demoralized team members and damage to the reputations of the team leader and the project. Unfortunately, the ASRS scenario is not unique. We know many cases just like it.

Building on our more than 20 years of work with teams and organizations,[5] we have identified several factors that distract or impede teams from understanding and describing the reasons behind their projects. We also recommend tactics to help make those reasons a unifying thread throughout the life of a project. (See "About the Research.")

Why *Why* Matters The *why* statement is a pivotal element in any project's brand. Without a solid *why*, a team can become overwhelmed by conflict and confusion, and all-important supporters can and will direct their attention elsewhere.

HOW *WHY* STATEMENTS INFLUENCE THE FIVE STAGES OF PROJECT BRANDING

A project's brand determines its reputation in the organization and influences the level of resource investment, voluntary effort and "buzz" surrounding the initiative. Solid project branding occurs in five interrelated stages, which we call the "Five Ps of Project Branding." The *why* statement plays an important role at each stage.

The Five Ps of Project Branding	PROJECT PITCH (Stage 1)	PROJECT PLAN (Stage 2)	PROJECT PLATFORM (Stage 3)	PROJECT PERFORMANCE (Stage 4)	PROJECT PAYOFF (Stage 5)
Key Action	The reason for the project is articulated and sold.	Project planning is competent, transparent and inclusive.	The project is officially launched with a level of fanfare and formality appropriate for the project and the organization.	The project is delivered with transparent results and effectively recovers from setbacks.	Definitive close of the project and dissemination of proof of project promise and lessons learned.
Outcome	Decision makers and team members are persuaded the project will deliver value to the organization.	All stakeholder are confident of and committed to the project.	Project and team have credibility and legitimacy with key stakeholders.	There are no surprises for stakeholders, who remain aware, engaged and supportive.	Stakeholders are aware of the project's conclusion and contributions.
The Value of *Why*	The *why* statement: •Is the most important ingredient in the project pitch. •Compels and persuades decision makers to listen to the rest of the story.	The *why* statement: •Ensures activities will address the core business problem. •Keeps the team focused and on track during planning.	The *why* statement: •Provides the reason for the rest of the organization to embrace the project. •Engages all stakeholders. •Ensures support throughout the organization.	The *why* statement: •Is the measure against which performance is evaluated. •Highlights whether progress to date has (or will) resolve the underlying problem. •Serves as a rallying cry to maintain project momentum.	The *why* statement: •Is the definitive benchmark of project completion. •Provides the baseline from which the project's proof of promise is presented.

The pitch stage is the project advocate's first chance to persuade decision makers and team members that the project has a legitimate, compelling rationale and, if completed successfully, will deliver value to the organization.[6] A project pitched with a clear and compelling *why* will inspire people to feel the project is worth the time and effort. What's more, a solid *why* helps the organization stay focused on the reasons for continuing to support the project. When the leader and team become immersed in the details of planning and delivery, the purpose of the project frequently fades from view.[7] Project leaders — consumed with keeping the project on track — often fail to remind stakeholders and team members of the ultimate goal.[8]

Is Your Project Missing a Solid *Why*? Over the years, we have repeatedly observed patterns and behaviors that cause project leaders, teams and sponsors to fail to identify a solid *why* before they launch their projects. In some instances, teams leap into action before they have explored all the possible motivations for a project.[9] In others, a shared *why* never emerges because individuals or groups are unwilling to engage in discussions that might involve conflict or expose hidden agendas that other team members might not embrace.[10] We have also worked with teams who see a solution only in terms of the fix they know and, from the outset, will pursue a familiar course of action, although it may not address the real problem. (See "Common Impediments to a Real Understanding of *Why*," p. 52.)

Developing Useful *Why* Statements

Given the tendency of groups to overlook, sidestep or forget the *why* of a project, project leaders, team members, stakeholders and the organization can derive real benefits from developing a clear and succinct description of the reasons driving the initiative. That might sound simple, but it's not. Most of the time, a good *why* statement is the product of a lot of work and heated debate. A structured discussion can speed up the process. Our favorite method, based on Kepner and Tregoe's classic work on managerial decisions,[11] involves answering four key questions:

1. **Identity:** What is the problem?
2. **Location:** Where do we see it?
3. **Timing:** When does it occur or when did it begin?
4. **Magnitude:** How big is this problem in measurable terms?

The first question, identity, requires that the problem be clearly stated. Although seemingly obvious, this initial question is where many teams have difficulty. One tactic to help reveal the core problem is to

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

For more than 20 years, we have worked with hundreds of teams in a wide range of organizations and industries, including aerospace, health care, the military, education, entertainment, consumer electronics and financial services. Through our empirical observations, we have learned that project team members and leaders are fairly good at articulating some of the obvious factors that lead to less-than-successful project performance but often overlook more subtle root causes. In many cases, an ill-defined problem will doom a project from the start. Building on our observational research, we carried out more formal and structured in-depth interviews to derive the key insights highlighted in this article. Post-hoc reports from teams applying our recommendations support the importance of clear and careful problem definition to project management success.

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ask in repeating fashion why the issue is important. This is a variation of a widely used process-improvement technique known as "Five Whys"[12] but differs in its direction of questioning in that it focuses on the problem and not its causes. A project leader needs to ask these repeated *whys* early in meetings with the sponsor or customer, and always through the lens of the overall question, "Why is this important to customers and the organization?" These might also be thought of as "So what?" questions.

The following exchange, from an Argentinian company we will call Sport Diamante (not its real name), is derived from a real project situation and illustrates the value of the technique:

Project Sponsor: "*We need a distribution center in São Paulo.*"
Project Leader: "*Why is this important?*"
Project Sponsor: "*Because customers in Brazil are complaining of long lead times, missed deliveries and late deliveries.*"
Project Leader: "*Why is this important?*"
Project Sponsor: "*Our sales are eroding in Brazil.*"
Project Leader: "*So what?*"
Project Sponsor: "*Brazil represents 40% of our business.*"

COMMON IMPEDIMENTS TO A REAL UNDERSTANDING OF *WHY*

A number of behaviors cause project leaders, teams and sponsors to fail to identify a solid *why* statement before they launch a project.

IMPEDIMENTS	EXAMPLES
The action bias The project team leaps into action before members have thoroughly assessed the situation and considered the "big *why*."	During the oil spill crisis in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, numerous volunteers arrived to help — but often became frustrated as they tried to find ways to do so. Many wanted to help clean oil from birds' wings[i] — a practice whose efficacy some have questioned.[ii] Of course, if anyone were asked what the higher-level problem was, they would have said, "The oil spill is spreading and threatening additional damage." The fact that birds had oil on their wings, while certainly not to be discounted, was not the central problem. And in fact, if resources were not carefully deployed toward addressing the spill itself, even more birds would be fouled.
The familiar solution Individuals within a specialty field see a challenge in terms of the fix they know. They define the problem as the absence of their standard solution.	Faced with the need to remove the carcass of a dead gray whale from a beach in a tourist area, Oregon state highway engineers in 1970 thought of the method they normally used to remove highway construction obstacles — dynamite. Participants became so convinced that dynamite was the solution that they failed to consider whether dynamite would address the underlying *why*, which was that the smelly, rotting carcass was scaring away tourists and presenting potential health risks. Instead, they defined the problem as "This dead whale has not been blown up yet." The story did not have a happy ending: The blast scattered blubber, some of it in chunks the size of small boulders, into residential and commercial areas up to a quarter mile from the blast site and left large pieces of the foul-smelling carcass still sitting on the beach.[iii]
A myopic view of the cause Fallibilities of human psychology[iv] can cause people to assume a single causal factor as the *why* for a project.	To make its employees safer, a Midwestern electric utility implemented program after program of increasingly restrictive work rules. These efforts, however, did not result in lower rates of injury.[v] In fact, in some cases, the new rules actually increased the number of incidents because of workarounds employees began to use to get their jobs done. Company officials mistakenly defined the problem as "Employees are not following safe work practices"[vi] rather than unacceptably high injury rates.[vii] Employee failure to follow procedures was just one of many causes of the problem, but it was not the problem itself. The most common error in a myopic view of a problem's cause involves blaming individuals as the single causal factor rather than first clearly defining the problem. This is part of what is known as the fundamental attribution error.[viii]
Unresolved conflict Tensions about a project's purpose and value remain below the surface early in the planning cycle and are allowed to simmer untended.[ix]	Directors of a large metropolitan library system began to engage in heated arguments during the planning stages of an "Amnesty Week" that would allow patrons to return overdue books without a fine. A facilitator intervened to inquire if there was consensus about the reason for the project. It turned out there had been disagreements all along, but team members had ignored them and attempted to limp along without resolving the issues. Once the directors, with strong input from the CEO, agreed that the purpose was to address a recent decline in the library system's public approval rating, the group was able to commence planning in relative harmony. The revised plan included a much stronger emphasis on communication and marketing about the Amnesty Week. Additionally, the team expanded book drop points beyond library branches to include neighborhood grocery stores, which would be more convenient and less intimidating to those with long-overdue books. The revised project was a major success, and some books that had been out more than 50 years were returned to the collection.
A hidden agenda[x] The project is pushed into existence for reasons that serve the hidden agenda of an individual or subgroup.	In advance of a women's leadership tour of China, a U.S.-based organization solicited the donation of a portable mammogram unit for use in a rural area the group would be visiting. The stated *why* for the donation was that rural Chinese women did not have access to breast cancer screening and donating this piece of equipment would contribute to improving women's health. Unfortunately, women in the area to be served did not have access to affordable cancer treatment, so an increased rate of diagnosis would not add value. This was clearly the wrong project to pursue if women's health issues were truly the underlying drivers. In actuality, group leaders were most interested in the positive publicity they would gain from the donation. (At least one member of the group had unannounced ambitions to gain a diplomatic appointment.) When this initiative's misdirection surfaced, it sapped the motivational energy and commitment of some group members. The expensive portable screening equipment was delivered but never used.
Distractions Once a project has been launched, competing demands and new opportunities can divert a team's attention from the *why* that originally necessitated the effort.	A rural community in Kyrgyzstan faced declining economic conditions because of a blight that left much of the apple crop unsellable as fresh fruit. Efforts to spray for insects proved ineffective. A nonprofit nongovernmental organization offered a substantial grant to build a processing plant that would allow the community to obtain income from canned and juiced apples and provide a welcome influx of construction wages. Community leaders, excited by the new opportunity, dropped efforts to further investigate the cause of the blight. A team of experts, brought in coincidentally, discovered that the true reason for declining crop yields was a fungus, not insects. With careful pruning and application of fungal defenses, crop yields were restored. Had community leaders continued to stray from their original *why*, the community could have ended up with a new processing plant but no crop to process.

ADDRESSING THE IMPEDIMENT

Ask: What is the most important problem here? Are our actions solving the core problem? Are we potentially sabotaging larger-scale efforts aimed at the big picture? If actions are misaligned with overall priorities, adjust and redirect priorities and activities. If answers are unclear, challenge the project team to step back and thoroughly assess the situation before considering solution options and moving to action.

Ask: Will this course of action address the true problem? We also advise teams to beware of what we call "lack of" statements because they typically indicate a preordained solution. If the team is stuck on a known fix, challenge members to express in writing (to reduce miscommunication about and make explicit) the problem the project seeks to solve. Once agreement is reached, brainstorm a wide range of solutions, with the recognition that the known fix is only one possibility.

Ask: Have we defined the problem in terms of an important organizational outcome, or have we looked too narrowly at a potential cause and hastily identified it as the problem? Challenge the team to clearly articulate the performance gap it seeks to close. Then ask the team to identify multiple possible causes — not just one. Although there may only be a single cause, this conclusion should be reached only after due diligence to discover if there are other contributing factors a solution should address.

Ask: Have we discussed and agreed on the reason that drives the need for the project — before beginning real work? If not, challenge project team members to express (in speech or in writing) their individual understanding of the problem driving the project, engage in a discussion to develop a common understanding of the problem and then confirm alignment with the project sponsor.

Ask: Have we had a frank and open discussion to bring to the surface any unstated *whys* that might be driving the project and/or team member participation? Capture the assumed project motivation in writing and confirm with involved parties. Perhaps even better advice is to not pursue projects that have hidden agendas.

Ask: Do our current activities address the problem the project was initially intended to solve, or have we strayed from that goal? If the project has strayed, help the team adjust and redirect priorities and activities.

> **Project Leader** (tactfully)**:** "We need to launch a project to solve the problem of customer dissatisfaction with long lead times, missed deliveries and late deliveries in Brazil. The solution we develop might or might not involve a new distribution center."

Only through repeated and deeper probes has the project leader discerned the core business problem driving the project — one that explains to team members, stakeholders and the larger organization why they should care about the situation and, more importantly, why they should devote energy to doing something about it. There are no rules regarding the number of "Why is this important?" queries, except to persevere until the reason articulated is a critical business issue that can rally team members and other important constituents. Managers often are too quick to define a problem in terms of a familiar solution (for example, lack of a distribution center) and don't realize until too late that they haven't actually addressed the underlying gap between actual and desired performance. As the saying goes, to a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

A tip we offer teams whose members are struggling with problem definition is to focus on customers, who can be internal or external. We tell these teams: "If the customer would not care about the problem as you have defined it, you need to dig a little deeper." For example, if a team defines a problem as "a serious bottleneck in step two of the process," we push members to describe why a bottleneck in step two is important to customers. What customers really care about is not the bottleneck per se but either that the company cannot meet the volume of customer demand or that the process frustrates customers because it takes too long. Both of these customer-oriented *whys* offer team members the perspective to keep open minds about causes (of which the bottleneck might be one) and, more importantly, what a solution might look like.

Location is the second dimension of an effective *why* statement and answers the question, "Where do we see the problem?" *Where* can refer to a physical location (for example, a country, city or facility), a market segment, a product category, a machine or a

process step. Multiple elements typically make up the location dimension. For the Sport Diamante scenario described above, the problem location involves both a geographic element (Brazil) and a product element (all company offerings). Specifying the elements of location places practical boundaries on the problem to be addressed. For this example, the *why* driving the project and the solution that eventually evolves need not address sales challenges in Argentina or other South American markets — only Brazil — and must be applicable to all product lines.

Timing The third dimension, timing, involves specifying when the problem occurs, when it began and how long it is likely to persist if no action is taken. Knowing when the problem began (for instance, delivery problems were first reported six months ago) and when the problem occurs (for example, delivery problems have persisted continuously but peak near the end of each month) can provide guidance regarding where to look for a cause. (For example, what else changed six months ago that might have a bearing on delivery performance in Brazil?) Answering whether the problem is likely to persist if no action is taken ensures that scarce resources are invested in addressing real, not phantom or transient, business challenges.

Magnitude is the fourth dimension and speaks to the significance and scale of the issue: How big is the problem in measurable terms? Are customers in Brazil receiving products a day late, two days late, two weeks late or not at all? An assessment of the problem's magnitude also involves identifying the potential measurable consequences of this problem for the organization. Answers to questions regarding magnitude are critical to establishing project urgency and the scale and resource requirements of an appropriate response. Knowing, for example, that Brazilian sales constitute 40% of annual revenues, 30% of Brazilian customers have complained and 10% have defected to competitors signals that this problem is critical to the organization.

The four dimensions of a *why* statement provide a structured description of the business gap that drives the project. (See "The Four Dimensions of an Effective *Why* Statement.") A *why* statement should be developed early in the gestation of a project — before significant resources are misdirected toward a poorly defined issue that is not the real problem.

The key benefit of the four-element *why* statement is that it specifies the parameters of the gap in a way that can help the team avoid some common biases and errors. For example, the *why* statement for the Sport Diamante scenario might be summarized as: Brazil constituted 40% of our business six months ago, but its share is falling fast. Nearly one-third of our Brazilian customers have complained of long lead times, missed deliveries and late deliveries. Ten percent have even dropped us as a vendor.

This simple structure forms the basis for a well-organized pitch for the project that is easily grasped by stakeholders. (See "Test the Strength of Your *Why* Statement.") In this case, the problem is isolated to a specific location (Brazil) and manifested itself in the last two quarters. This clarity and precision enable everyone to explore multiple causal factors (processes, people, technology, externalities), set outcome-oriented goals (such as shorter and more predictable delivery times) and imagine a full range of possible solutions for closing the gap (for example, improved logistics, a streamlined ordering process, a different transportation company, new technology or employee training).

Observe that the Sport Diamante *why* statement

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF AN EFFECTIVE *WHY* STATEMENT

Producing a good *why* statement often requires both a lot of work and heated debate. A structured discussion focusing on four key dimensions — identity, location, timing and measurability — can speed up the process.

COMPONENT	QUESTION	EXAMPLE
Identity	What is the problem?	Delivery performance — long lead times, missed deliveries, late deliveries
Location	Where do we see it?	For all products sold in Brazil, but not in Argentina or other South American markets
Timing	When does it occur or when did it begin? Is it likely to persist if no action is taken?	Delivery problems in Brazil began six months ago, have occurred consistently since that time, are more prevalent near the end of each month and are likely to continue without intervention.
Magnitude	How big is this problem in measurable terms? What are the potential consequences for our organization?	On average, it takes two more days to ship to customers in Brazil than it does to ship to customers in Argentina. Nearly one-third of our Brazilian customers have complained, and 10% have dropped our company as a vendor because of delivery problems. Prior to the most recent six-month period, Brazilian sales accounted for 40% of corporate revenues.

is fact-based and does not suggest a solution, speculate about causes or attempt to cast blame on individuals. We frequently see these types of biases in *why* statements, even those coming from experienced project teams. In the case of Sport Diamante, these misdirects might have played out as follows:

1. "The problem is we need a new distribution center." (This illustrates two of the biases described in "Common Impediments to a Real Understanding of *Why*": the action bias and the familiar solution.)

2. "Ed is the problem — he should not have committed to the one-week turnaround time on orders for Brazil." (This is an example of a preconceived, myopic notion about causality — and the attributional tendency to blame individuals rather than considering broader contextual factors.)

3. "The problem is we do not fully grasp the nuances of effective product distribution in Brazil." (This rather vague observation hints at a possible cause, but it is not a *why* statement.)

To be sure, not all project *why* statements begin with problems — some are spawned by opportunities (for example, new business ventures, new market entries). But in the majority of cases, projects are designed to close gaps and address business problems — quality expert J.M. Juran even defined a project as "a problem scheduled for solution." (In fact, Juran goes so far as to state that without a problem, we really do not have a project.[13]) Perhaps it is simply a matter of how we phrase it — as a gap to be addressed or a vision to be fulfilled. Building on decision-making research as well as our own field-based observations, we advise teams to aim for problem-oriented *why* statements, not opportunity statements. Psychologists have found that decision makers tend to be more compelled by the potential loss — the problem (for example, "If we don't do X, our competitors will steal 75% of the growing Asian market") — than by the upside opportunity (for example, "If we do X, we can gain 75% of the Asian market").[14] The difference seems subtle, but the persuasive power of the first statement will be far greater.

Making It Happen — Putting *Why* Statements to Work

A team whose members take the time to develop a solid *why* statement and understand the importance of keeping it in clear view throughout the project's life cycle will avoid common errors that can derail

TEST THE STRENGTH OF YOUR *WHY* STATEMENT

Use this checklist to determine if you have organized your project activities to generate and remain focused on a strong *why* statement. The more questions you answer in the affirmative, the closer you are to having the key ingredients of a successful and focused project.

QUESTION	YES	NO
1. Has the project leader engaged in a *why* statement discussion with the sponsor, focusing on the perceived reasons driving project initiation?		
2. Do the project team, project leader and sponsor agree about the *why* statement? Have areas of disagreement been identified and resolved? (If the answer is "no," how might disagreements affect the focus and scope of the project?)		
3. Does the *why* statement specify the identity, location, timing and magnitude of the problem the project seeks to address? Is it in written form? Visual form?		
4. Have the project leader and team provided supporting evidence and justification for each of the four dimensions of the *why* statement for those who might request it — and for those who might resist solutions that grow from it?		
5. Has the team considered a range of options for solving the problem identified in the *why* statement? (In other words, have members avoided biases that might lead them to focus on a known fix within their comfort zone but that might not address the real *why* underlying the project?)		
6. Are the project leader, team and sponsor confident the project is addressing the real problem and not driven by a solution in search of a problem? (Tip: Beware of problem statements that include the words "lack of.")		
7. Have previously hidden agendas or unstated *whys* been brought to the surface and made explicit?		
8. Has the team avoided defining the problem in terms of a single causal factor, but rather presented it in terms of the problem itself?		
9. Has the *why* statement been shared with important stakeholders peripheral to the project team? Do these stakeholders have a clear understanding of the underlying *why* driving the project?		
10. Does the team regularly revisit the *why* statement to ensure that all members and their activities are on track to address the identified problem?		
11. When changing circumstances arise, does the team evaluate the *why* statement to ensure it still provides a "true north" for the project? In instances when it does not, is the team sufficiently adaptable to revise the *why* statement?		
12. Once the project is under way, does spoken, written and/or visual communication to external stakeholders (those outside the team) refresh their understanding of the *why* behind the project?		

> When the leader and team become immersed in the details of planning and delivery, the purpose of the project frequently fades from view. Project leaders — consumed with keeping the project on track — often fail to remind stakeholders and team members of the ultimate goal.

the project. Communication must consistently reinforce the project's initial brand by including messages not only about the initiative's progress and outcomes but also about its *raison d'être*. This unifying thread can be particularly important during the often-protracted project delivery phase when, as research has shown, engagement from customers and support from top-level managers can decline.[15]

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1. For a summary of recent studies of project failure, see "Why Projects Fail — Facts and Figures," accessed November 24, 2012, http://calleam.com. For examples of other explorations of research on the causes of project failure, see B.J. Sauser, R.R. Reilly and A.J. Shenhar, "Why Do Projects Fail? How Contingency Theory Can Provide New Insights — A Comparative Analysis of Mars Climate Orbiter Loss," International Journal of Project Management 27, no. 7 (October 2009): 665-679; P.E.D. Love, D.J. Edwards and Z. Irani, "Forensic Project Management: An Exploratory Examination of the Causal Behavior of Design-Induced Rework," IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management 55, no. 2 (May 2008): 234-247; and G. Pan, S.L. Pan and M. Newman, "Information Systems Project Post-Mortems: Insights From an Attribution Perspective," Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology 58, no. 14 (December 2007): 2255-2268. Earlier references include J.K. Pinto and J.G. Covin, "Critical Factors in Project Implementation: A Comparison of Construction and R&D Projects," Technovation 9, no. 1 (May 1989): 49-62; and J.K. Pinto and D.P. Slevin, "Critical Factors in Successful Project Implementation," IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management EM-34, no. 1 (February 1987): 22-27.

2. K.A. Brown, R. Ettenson and N.L. Hyer, "Why Every Project Needs a Brand (and How to Create One)," MIT Sloan Management Review, 52, no. 4 (summer 2011): 61-68.

3. Project branding phases run in parallel with commonly recognized project phases: selection, initiation, planning, delivery and closure. Various authors use different terms to describe the phases in the project life cycle, but selection, initiation, planning, delivery and closure are a sensible, practical description and not inconsistent with nomenclature offered by the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge. See "A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)" (Newtown Square, Pennsylvania: Project Management Institute, Inc., 2013).

4. For a useful discussion about how to avoid the trap of focusing on time and cost while ignoring performance, see N.F. Matta and R.N. Ashkenas, "Why Good Projects Fail Anyway," Harvard Business Review 81, no. 9 (September 2003): 109-114.

5. Some readers might raise the point that an absence of *why* statements does not rise to the surface in survey research on causes of project failure. One explanation is that survey findings are limited by self-serving biases. Specifically, respondents are inclined to identify causal factors they can attribute to others. A project leader may be reluctant to admit not knowing why his or her project was initiated. To avoid this bias, we have opted for a case-based observational approach to discover insights into project *why* statements. However, a common finding of survey research — that unclear goals lead to project failure — offers an important connection to our research. Goals can represent aspirations to close gaps and thus, if stated accurately, will connect to a project's underlying *why*.

6. Brown et al., "Why Every Project," MIT Sloan Management Review 52.

7. J.K. Pinto, "Project Management: Achieving Competitive Advantage" (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2010), 10-13. In Chapter 1 (p. 12), Pinto cites a paper by V. Sohmen, "Project Termination: Why the Delay?" which was presented at the PMI Research Conference, July 2002, in Seattle, Washington, and displays a figure showing the intensity levels for client interest, client stake, resources, expenditures and uncertainty. The challenge for project branding is that just when expenditures are highest, during project execution, client (and by extension, sponsor) interest is on the wane.

8. Although it is outside the scope of this paper, we acknowledge the work of Simon Sinek, who stresses the importance of why statements as the drivers for all aspects of the work of organizations, not just projects. He argues that the lack of a mission-driven why puts an organization at risk for survival. See S. Sinek, "Start With Why:

How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action" (New York: Penguin, 2009).

9. Hammond et al. observe that failure to clearly define a problem is evidence of laziness on the part of decision makers, who stop with the obvious rather than digging deeper; the result often sets them on the wrong course of action. See J.S. Hammond, R.L. Keeney and H. Raiffa, "Smart Choices: A Practical Guide to Making Better Decisions" (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1999). We also can view the difference between seeking the problem and jumping to solutions in what Garvin and Roberto describe as advocacy versus inquiry. Advocacy involves focusing too soon on a solution, and inquiry involves asking probing questions about the solution. See D.A. Garvin and M.A. Roberto, "What You Don't Know About Making Decisions," Harvard Business Review 79, no. 8 (September 2001): 108-116.

10. See, for example, H.S. Ng, F. Peña-Mora and T. Tamaki, "Dynamic Conflict Management in Large-Scale Design and Construction Projects," Journal of Management in Engineering 23, no. 2 (April 2007): 52-66; and H.S. Desivilya and D. Eizen, "Conflict Management in Work Teams: The Role of Social Self-Efficacy and Group Identification," International Journal of Conflict Management 16, no. 2 (2005): 183-208.

11. C.H. Kepner and B.B. Tregoe, "The New Rational Manager" (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Research Press, 1981).

12. J.Y. Shook, "Bringing the Toyota Production System to the United States: A Personal Perspective" in "Becoming Lean: Inside Stories of U.S. Manufacturers," ed. J.K. Liker (Portland, Oregon: Productivity Press, 1997), 41-70.

13. See J.M. Juran, "Juran on Leadership for Quality: An Executive Handbook" (New York: Free Press, 1989).

14. D. Kahneman and A. Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," Econometrica 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263-291.

15. Pinto, "Project Management."

i. D. Zak, "Gung-ho but Untrained, Volunteers Hit a Wall in Helping Mitigate Oil Spill," Washington Post, June 29, 2010.

ii. See J. Flesher and N. Schwartz, "Rescuing Oiled Birds: Poignant, but Is It Futile?" June 10, 2010, Associated Press, accessed at http://usnews.com.

iii. P. Linnman, "The Exploding Whale and Other Remarkable Stories From the Evening News" (Portland, Oregon: WestWinds Press, 2003).

iv. For more on this topic, see Kahneman and Tversky, "Prospect Theory," Econometrica 47.

v. P.G. Willis, K.A. Brown and G.E. Prussia, "Does Employee Safety Influence Customer Satisfaction? Evidence From the Electric Utility Industry," Journal of Safety Research 43, no. 5-6 (December 2012): 389-396.

vi. For more on the traps of blaming cycles in process improvement, see N.R. Repenning and J.D. Sterman, "Capability Traps and Self-Confirming Attribution Errors in the Dynamics of Process Improvement," Administrative Science Quarterly 47, no. 2 (June 2002): 265-295.

vii. As Bass observes, this is an example of defining a problem in terms of its symptoms, and the problem is likely to reappear with new symptoms. See B.M. Bass, "Organizational Decision Making" (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1983). It also represents an example of self-serving bias — by blaming employees, managers take themselves out of the causal equation.

viii. K.A. Brown, "Explaining Group Poor Performance: An Attributional Analysis," Academy of Management Review 9, no. 1 (January 1984): 54-63.

ix. CH2M Hill, "Project Delivery: A System and Process for Benchmark Performance" (Denver, Colorado: CH2M Hill, 1996). Beyond case-based evidence, empirical research has shown that teams whose members bring conflict to the surface early in a project tend to be more successful than those who allow conflicts to simmer. For example, see K.A. Brown, T.D. Klastorin and J.L. Valluzzi, "Project Performance and the Liability of Group Harmony," IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management. 37, no. 2 (May 1990): 117-125.

x. This may also be viewed as a self-serving bias that gets in the way of problem definition. See D.T. Miller and M. Ross, "Self-Serving Biases in the Attribution of Causality: Fact or Fiction?" Psychological Bulletin 82, no. 2 (March 1975): 213-225.

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