The Hour Glass and the Project Manager-
Part 2: Improving your Hierarchical IQ by W. Scott Cameron

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In Part 1 of this article, I asked you to think of the Project Manager's (PM's) job in terms of an hourglass. In this analogy, the top of the hourglass is the PM's hierarchy, the bottom the project team,and the connecting tube the PM. The hourglass sand can be anything from proposals, directions, data, and other forms of articulated communication to the unstated forms of communication like assumptions, perceptions, and/or prejudices that pass between the two parts. A PM's success is often determined by his or her ability to effectively manage this passage of sand!

In Part 1, I focused mainly on the PM's role in managing the project team. Here I will consider the other end of the glass, the hierarchy. I base much of what I know on my own observations. You have probably noted that little is written or taught about how PMs should manage their hierarchy. The "Dilbert" cartoon strip may even be the most widely cited authority on this subject. My experience derives primarily from an opportunity I once had to report directly to a manager four levels above me and to assist in managing his project teams and his hierarchy for two years. This, perhaps, could be the most insightful experience of my career. I learned what was important to five separate levels in my organization!

What PMs Say About Their Hierarchies

The comments I hear from PMs regarding their hierarchies generally tend toward varying states of bewilderment:

"They want me to manage everything and don't want to be disturbed."

"They've done this before...they should know how tough it is!!"

"They can't handle the truth!"

"They can't make up their minds and its hurting my project"

"They're busy and don't have time to spend with me."

"My hierarchy wants to meet with me regularly to follow my project's progress."

"They know what needs to be done, why don't they just do it?"

"Hierarchy was totally aligned to my project 6 months ago. What could have changed?"

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Things to Keep in Mind

Some things PMs must realize about hierarchy:

• Hierarchy is comprised of individuals, each with his or her own biases, assumptions, experiences, expectations, concerns, and knowledge about the project, the project team, and the PM. When a PM lumps all these individuals together, "they" become much harder to manage than any one individual.

• Hierarchy is comprised of levels. The individual needs and expectations of one level toward the PM may be at odds with those at other levels. A PM needs to understand what the needs and expectations are at each level and determine a strategy to address them.

• Not all hierarchy has decision-making rights on a project. A PM has to be able to understand and differentiate what each level can accomplish.

• Hierarchy has information about future events that can impact the PM's project. The PM must gain the hierarchy's trust and confidence to obtain this information as soon as possible to properly manage the project team.

Your Hierarchical IQ

I believe PMs should take the following steps to measure and then improve their hierarchical IQ:

• Understand your authority on the project and what items require decisions from outside the project team.

• Learn, early in the project's life, about all organizations whose hierarchy may impact your project.

• Learn the name and level of the individuals in the hierarchy you plan to maintain a communication link with. Understand what decisions pertinent to your project each level is able to make.

• Hold regular meetings (group or 1:1) with specific members of the hierarchy to better understand each one's needs and expectations throughout the life of the project.

• Bring the hierarchy together on a regular basis to review the project. Too often the PM assumes the hierarchy discusses the project and the PM's concerns with one another. This is not always a safe assumption.

If you don't understand who your hierarchy is and how they can impact your project, you don't have a very high hierarchical IQ!

> *"* You have probably noted that little is written or taught about how PMs should manage their hierarchy. *"*

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Communicating With Hierarchy

Once you take the above steps, you need to improve on the following two areas to better influence your hierarchy and increase your hierarchical IQ.

1. Sharpen your listening skills. Surprisingly, few PMs really listen to what their hierarchies are trying to tell them. If you ever wanted to be that infamous fly on the wall, remember that flies aren't known for being big talkers. PMs want to communicate their thoughts, ideas, plans, etc. to the hierarchy. This is good and expected of you, but the key is to listen to what the hierarchy is telling you about your project. Learn what could positively or negatively impact it, and then act accordingly.

2. Sharpen your proposal making skills. PMs should be very clear what they want the hierarchy to do. Don't allow hierarchy to try and guess what you want from them. If you want them to do something, you should have the conviction to ask for it. If you don't want them to do anything, you should state this clearly. PMs should understand what they want of their hierarchy prior to meeting with them either in group settings or in 1:1 meetings.

This wraps up my thoughts on the Hour Glass and the Project Manager. Now it's time to go out and practice what you've learned. Hurry now, as the sand is always flowing in your hourglass.

> " Don't allow hierarchy to try and guess what you want from them. "