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Preparing for Launch

A human-centered
approach to project kickoffs

Deloitte
Greenhouse[™]

Failure to launch

The sprinter and the swimmer have their starting block. The tennis player, her serve. In the world of sports, the start of play is well understood to have cascading ripple effects on the final outcome.

For sprinters and swimmers, the right start off the block can convey the few milliseconds that separate first and last place. For tennis players, the serve becomes the impenetrable fortress of a player's game or its greatest weakness. Athletes of course know this. They obsess over the start, drilling and perfecting it to a degree unfathomable to many of us. Our research tells us that the start of a project is no different, no less reverberating, no less predictive of the end.

The kickoff of a project comes with boundless opportunity: achieving new goals, finding new solutions, learning from new people. However, seizing these opportunities while navigating the regular uncertainty of a new effort can be a challenge at best and a colossal failure at worst. The research is grim: 43 percent

of organizations have suffered a recent project failure¹. 57 percent of projects fail due to breakdown in communications². 75 percent of business and IT executives admit that their projects are "doomed from the start"³.

Companies spend billions of dollars annually on projects of various types – in 2016, \$58 billion was spent on consulting services alone, which doesn't account for internally led and executed efforts⁴. Project failure, therefore, has wide-ranging implications not only for an individual organization but also for the broader economy. As the economy continues to shift to increasingly project-based work, the cost of starting off on the wrong foot will only multiply over time. This cost impacts the employee experience, leading to greater friction, diminished engagement, and possibly damaged careers. It impacts customer experience, service delivery and quality control, leading to decreased customer satisfaction and loyalty. It impacts a company's positioning in the marketplace and ability to execute, leading to weak return on investment and the risk of lagging behind competitors.

And then there's the less obvious human impact of failure. Vast research supports the emotional, psychological, and physical health benefits of quick wins, big achievements, and the activation of 'flow states' along the way (complete immersion in feelings of energized, focused, joyful work in the moment). These benefits translate directly to the bottom and top line – for the former, through lower turnover, absenteeism, health-related costs and improved productivity; and for the latter, through increased creativity and innovation. But we believe there's a subtle, yet more important cost – the one to humanity itself. The experience of project failure, in short, isn't pleasant, affirming, or uplifting. It's a long slog. Multiply this by the millions of people engaged in project work today in the U.S. alone, and the case for improving not only the outcome but also the experience of project work becomes a case for giving people a greater sense of purpose and self-actualization – a benefit of incalculable value.

The launch redux

In the results of an extensive survey of leaders of large-scale technology projects, detailed in the article, "Fanatical About Starting Smart,"⁵ Deloitte found that the success of a project is closely tied to the way it begins. In particular, the most critical elements are defining outcomes, building the right team, and crafting a reasonable plan. While seemingly self-evident in theory, these tactical best practices can be extraordinarily challenging to realize in practice, even in organizations that think they have mastered them. We wanted to know why.

To find out, we interviewed thirty Deloitte and client executives who'd led projects across disciplines, from strategy to technology implementation. We synthesized our findings from conducting thousands of immersive workshops with teams in the Deloitte Greenhouse™ Breakthrough Labs. And we scoured the academic world to curate relevant research insights from specialists in the field. In short, we found that the problem isn't tactical or strategic; it's human. Human factors, difficult to influence and thus rarely considered a critical element to address at project kickoff, can explain

much of the gap between aspiration and execution. Specifically, leaders can make three specific moves to catalyze a big head start and remove barriers before they come up:

- **Ambition** – Dial up the drama with a vision ('what') and purpose ('why') that move people; mere goals don't cut it. The ambition of the project should ignite ambition in the team.
- **Action** – Relentlessly address the hidden barriers to action inherent in the ambition and plan. Denial of organizational and external risks can wreck the best of ambitions.
- **Team** – Get the team right, but also get the team real - human interactions are governed by more than roles and org charts.

What follows is a synthesis of our detailed findings on the challenges and routes to addressing the nuanced, people-oriented side of these three focus areas. As one of our interviewees said, "Work isn't about work; it's about humans."



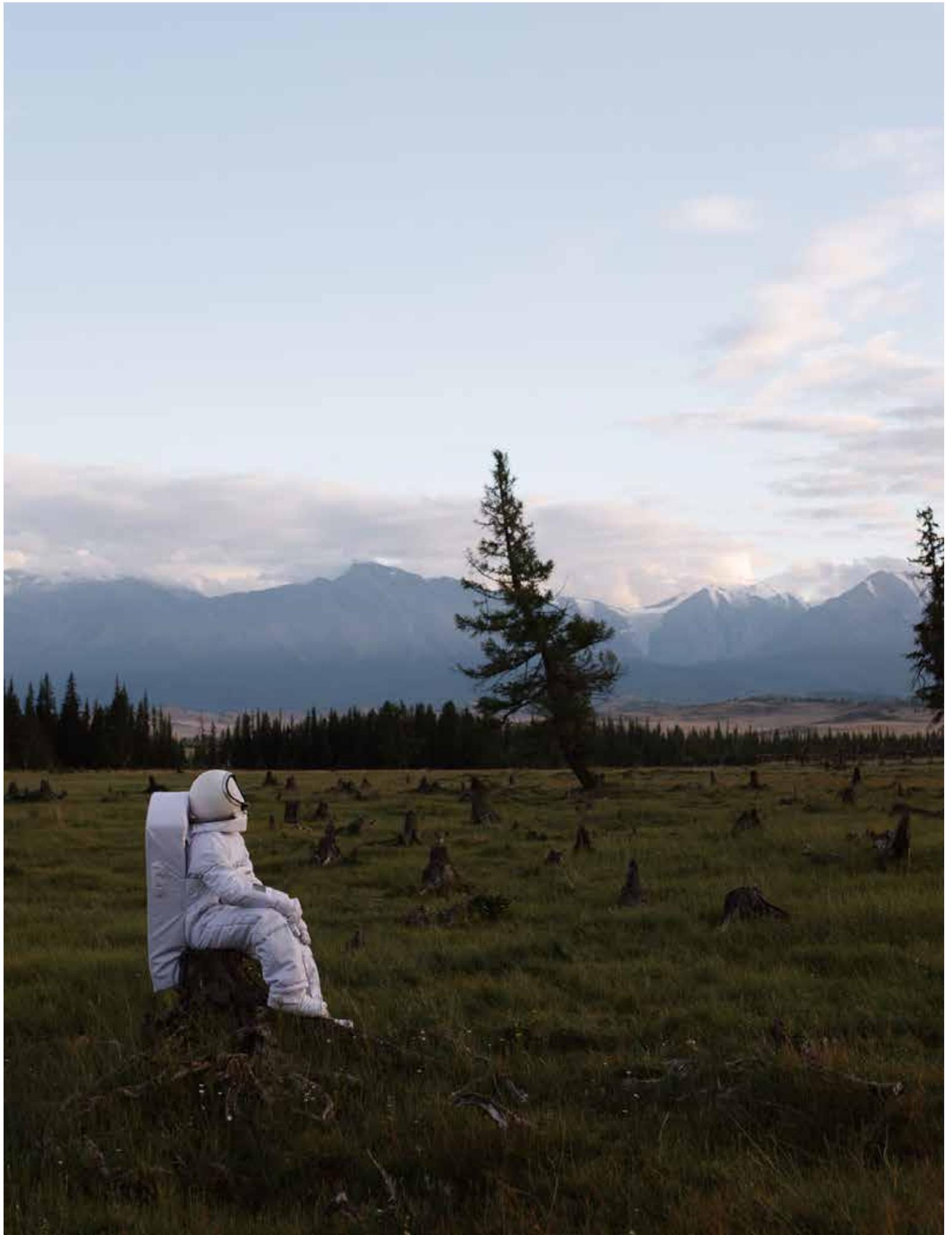
AMBITION



ACTION



TEAM





AMBITION

Awake a 'What' and a 'Why'

The Challenge

A new project starts with a set of goals: 'more customers,' 'higher returns,' 'greater efficiencies,' to name a few. But for these goals to be realized, a team requires something more deeply felt, and 'efficiencies' doesn't usually cut it. To buzz and roar forward with the relentless energy of real life, a project needs to activate what we call an ambition – the totality of everything the project will achieve. We identify an ambition as having two distinct components: vision and purpose.

The first challenge in activating an ambition is one of definition. Leaders often conflate vision with purpose. Yet they are two distinct pieces of an ambition. The vision is specifically the 'what' – what is the actual *thing* the team is bringing into existence with this project? The purpose is the 'why' – why is the team doing this; why should any living, breathing human being care? Whereas the vision paints a vivid picture of the destination, the purpose tells the team why it should go on the journey to begin with...and stick to it when the road gets difficult.

The central challenge related to project visions is, quite plainly, many projects don't have them. A vision is not a bulleted list of business goals, a description of project workstreams, or a single sentence at the beginning of a project overview, and yet, this is often the full extent to which a vision is addressed.

The first problem with this approach arises from issues inherent in language and rhetoric – namely, that words mean different things to different people, leading to a muddled, inconsistent understanding – the very opposite of alignment. When a dry, purely linear, words-only vision statement is presented, no one can disagree with it in theory, and then teams find themselves blindsided when this misalignment rears its ugly head as details come into view. Depending on the words used, the vision can also engender a hyper-literal interpretation, skepticism, and fear of potential impacts to a team member's domain or function.

Additionally, the common approach to visioning lacks emotional resonance, surprise, and drama. These elements are required if a vision is to grab attention, be remembered, and elicit commitment and passion – no goal or ambition matters, regardless of how compelling the reason for it, if no one remembers it.

When it comes to purpose, the challenge is simple: teams usually stop once they've identified the business goals of a project. Broadcasting business goals is important, but something deeper is needed to motivate and sustain people over the long haul. Even when teams identify a purpose beyond business goals, it falls flat when it resonates emotionally. The purpose often isn't connected directly to the humans who will benefit from it, and the value it brings them isn't brought to life in an impactful way. This oversight forgoes a huge opportunity to engage the team and the broader organization around the project.

The ambition challenge, in short

Projects often have a muddy ambition because they lack a real vision, expressed in left-brained, business terms and words, and they neglect purpose, leaving both the 'what' and the 'why' incomplete. This usual kickoff approach misses a big opportunity to neutralize common issues; it:

- Leads to inconsistent interpretation and invisible misalignment.
- Lacks emotion and surprise, key elements of recall, commitment, and passion.
- Engenders hyper-literal interpretation, leading to skepticism and a purely tactical focus.
- Fails to call out the deeper, human purpose, which is what 'sells' the project and turns people into advocates.

The Opportunity

Expressing a vision in more dynamic, compelling ways can help address the twofold challenge of creating a real ambition: first, creating crystal clarity and excitement around the 'what,' and second, sparking advocacy through the activation of a compelling 'why.' This is best accomplished through emotionally resonant, tangible means that bring the desired future to Technicolor™ life: visual, immersive narratives and scenarios; surprising, creative brand campaigns; tactile, working prototypes; or all of the above. In addition to making the vision crystal clear, these tactics make it resonant. Numerous studies in neuroscience⁶ and group cohesion⁷ have found that such an expression helps spur an "emotional contagion" of behavioral mimicry and shifts in brain function that build commitment. By co-creating a vision across media rather than mincing words on a single slide, teams are more likely to reach shared understanding. The Deloitte Greenhouse team uses one of the design principles of our Breakthrough Manifesto⁸ to sum up this concept as "A prototype is a worth a thousand discussions."

Our research revealed a number of guiding principles for creating an impactful vision:

- Make it a leap into the future, as though it's already happening. It should vividly immerse the team in what it aspires to achieve.
- Make it real - multi-sensory, immersive, and touchable.
- Create something inspirational and aspirational that fosters an emotional connection to the vision.

- Illustrate how it impacts all those affected by bringing their stories to life.
- Tie it directly to each person's day-to-day work so they can understand their own agency in making the vision a reality.

As for crafting a purpose – the critical next step – keep these guiding principles in mind:

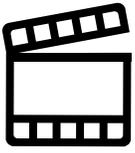
- Don't settle for easy. Getting to a real purpose that inspires true commitment may be hard, but it can pay off in the long run. Leaders can consider asking those who aren't committed to leave the project.
- Have individuals identify their personal purpose for investing in this project – without this intrinsic motivation, team members are more likely to check out when the going gets tough.
- Tie the purpose of the project to the broader purpose of the people who benefit from it. Ask the team, "Why are we doing this for our customers (or patients or members or end consumer)?"
- Articulate how the purpose impacts the world. While a lofty challenge, the process of asking this question can reveal connections and domino effects that teams would otherwise be blind.
- Put the purpose front and center, as part of the project's guiding principles (more on this later).

To build an ambition

A leader can use the following moves to build a vision that moves people.

- **Make it touchable** Vividly immerse the team in what it aspires to achieve by being multi-sensory, immersive, and tangible.
- **Inspire** Create something inspirational and aspirational, complete with a galvanizing purpose that touches on the deeper 'why' of the project, even if it's hard. Then put the vision and purpose everywhere, so people can't ignore it.
- **Own it** Illustrate how it impacts all those affected and tie it directly into each person's day-to-day work so they can understand their own agency in making the vision a reality.





ACTION

Think outside the plan

The Challenge

With an ambition that entails a rich vision and a purpose that calls it to move forward, a team may think it's ready to get to work. They hold a 'kickoff,' producing documentation and communications to describe the who, what, and how required to reach the vision. The communication is typically more of a monologue than a dialogue: leaders share it in a one-way, presentation-to-discussion format. Plans are distributed and presented at a high level, often with little room for dialogue, questions or challenge. Once the kickoff is complete, cohesion is assumed.

This typical kickoff approach fails to position a project for effective delivery. First, a solely plan-focused approach doesn't promote true collaboration across functions – in theory, an 'interdependency' may be cited on a project plan, but in practice, functional silos remain. We see that functions tend to withhold information – either intentionally, through turf wars, or unintentionally, due to habit. They may also remain on different planning schedules, leading one functional team to resist adapting its plan for another's, and vice versa. When conflict inevitably surfaces, ill-equipped project

managers try to take on a bridging or policing role across functional divides and often progress suffers.

Second, the conventional kickoff fails to promote productive debate and the challenging of assumptions, leaving individuals feeling disempowered to probe an element they disagree with or not really understanding what's expected of them. They may end up silently disregarding their dissent – and research finds that suppressing such disagreement and conflict only detracts from personal and organizational health⁹ – and often emerges later in the project.

Third, this approach fails to expose common cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, over-confidence, the status quo effect, and so on. We identified a few that are particularly problematic at kickoff. The first of these is what we call 'plan tunnel vision,' the tendency for teams to follow a locked and loaded plan despite internal or external events that should signal a change of course. The other blind spot manifests behaviorally as 'magical thinking.' By not testing the plan as a group, the team runs the risk of settling for plans that aren't realistic and can miss out on the opportunity to make improvements by bringing their collective knowledge of the organization's past execution issues to bear. This failure to challenge the plan does the teams a disservice, as it leads to entrenched denial – including setting unrealistic expectations, trying to deliver with inadequate resources, or ignoring a skills gap, to name a few. On the flip side, failure to adjust based on outside events can lead to the missing out on new, positive opportunities that have arisen. With this comes great opportunity cost in the form of forgone innovation and the business value it delivers.

The action challenge, in short

At the usual kickoff, the focus is all on the plan, communicated from the top-down. This approach misses an opportunity to address common barriers to action, by:

- Not promoting true collaboration across functions, turning the PMO into a police station and leading to silo fortification and mismatched cross-functional planning.
- Discouraging productive debate and feasibility challenges, leaving individuals disempowered and lacking ownership.
- Failing to uncover critical blindspots like 'plan tunnel vision' and 'magical thinking'.

The Opportunity

Re-wiring the planning process can help teams begin to overcome some of these impediments to meaningful action. It helps to create an environment where the team can keep itself honest and actively engage with the plan, rather than passively receive it and either eventually ignore it or stick to it stubbornly despite contradictory signals.

We've developed a well-tested set of principles to guide a team that wants to better position itself for action:

- Focus on uncovering the elephants, those well-known issues that remain undiscussed, impeding the team's ability to perform. And expose *all* of the elephants, those specific to the team and those endemic to the greater organization. Many teams face both types.

- Conduct a pre-mortem, an exercise that asks teams to imagine two futures in the present tense: one in which the project is a failure, and the other a success. In one study, this exercise in “prospective hindsight” resulted in improvement in team outcomes of nearly 30 percent¹⁰.
- Have people get hands on and react to situations that might derail or force the plan to change, rather than just sharing and discussing the plan in abstract. Have teams practice foresight and adaptability with simulations of realistic external events that may impact the course or even goals of the project.

To incite action

Leaders can take the following steps to remove critical barriers to action and progress:

- **Expose Elephants** Focus on uncovering *all* of the elephants (those well-known issues that remain undiscussed) including ones specific to the team and those endemic to the greater organization.
- **Fast-Forward** Conduct a pre-mortem, an exercise that asks teams to imagine two futures in the present tense: one where the project was a failure, and one where it was a success.
- **Stress Test** Hit the ambition and plan with systemic shocks so people get hands-on and react to situations that might derail or force the plan to change and allow the team to practice foresight and adaptability.





Focus on humans, being

The Challenge

Crafting a vision of the future and clearing human barriers to action are essential, but paying equal attention at launch to a team's interpersonal dynamics can result in huge benefits. In short, the typical approach of focusing solely on the structural mechanics of teaming – roles and responsibilities; RACI charts; org charts and workstreams – forgoes significant benefits that derive from one specific opportunity: allowing the human beings on a team to be real humans.

The first challenge is one of authentic relationship building. A team is reduced to function, not family, when all that is known about its members can be expressed in an org chart (when members treat each other as mere 'colleagues' as opposed to friends). Teams rarely foster opportunities for deep, authentic personal connection – or worse, they feel they've checked this box by holding kickoff happy hours or participating in superficial ice breakers (trust falls, anyone?). This surface focus on relationship building breaks the potential for shared understanding and productive dialogue among the very individuals charged with realizing a vision, while failing to build the

increased interpersonal trust that leads to greater cooperation, collaboration, and productivity.

Another issue that arises from an overly tactical focus on teaming is that it fails to purposefully free people to be their authentic selves. Vast research on the topic of psychological safety has demonstrated the significant hard and soft benefits that come with shattering the divide between the work self and the real self. For example, in one study¹¹, University of Nebraska researchers found that leaders who model and create a culture of personal authenticity can contribute to greater organizational trust and effectiveness. Through greater trust of and appreciation for one another, team members are more likely to cultivate this environment of psychological safety and reap its many benefits. Further, Deloitte's own research on covering¹² – the act of downplaying or hiding aspects of personal identity known to others – found that 61 percent of workers do it, 55 percent of leaders expect it and that 55 percent of people report significantly decreased commitment to their organization because of it.

Thus, we believe that failing to catalyze real personal authenticity at the start of a project is almost inexcusably negligent. Shaping such an environment requires purposeful leadership commitment and a conscious design of team norms. These norms should be declared, written down, and remain front and center (in the form of guiding principles, a project manifesto, or other means).

Finally, when the teaming focus is all about mechanics, team members don't often take the time to articulate and understand their own working styles, or the styles of those around them and they rarely learn when and how to adapt their style to increase their impact. This leads to unnecessary friction when preferences clash. If team members aren't aware of their own working preferences and those of their colleagues, they can mistake a simple difference in style for a fundamental disagreement.

The team challenge, in short

Teaming is typically handled with org charts, R&R definitions, and workstream descriptions alone, ignoring the human factors at work. This is a missed opportunity at launch because:

- Deep relationships, which remove downstream hurdles between people while promoting trust and teamwork, aren't accelerated.
- There is no focus on building radical authenticity on the team, which is known to build greater commitment and outcomes.
- It fails to account for the diversity of individual working styles, leaving in place common, problematic interpersonal dynamics that impede progress.

The Opportunity

Getting to a next level of connection in a work environment can seem daunting, but it has real benefits. In the 2016 Empathy Index Study¹³, researchers reported that companies that scored well on empathy were found to have 50 percent higher earnings than those organizations that scored poorly.

For teams to engage more effectively with one another, we focus on three principles to keep in mind during a project launch.

- Build an understanding of team members' interpersonal dynamics and individual styles. Defining these is a great start, through a system like Deloitte's Business Chemistry[®], and actively role-playing how one person's style interacts with another's can help a team prepare for a difference of opinion – and avoid miscommunication - farther down the line. If team members can better appreciate and optimize for their differences, their collective creativity and productivity will benefit.

- Challenge team members to go deep with one another to build real, human relationships – not at a mixer, but through meaningful conversation around the life experiences and values that drive them personally and professionally. Encourage team members to share at a deep, personal level. Only by “going there” in an open, but safe, manner can teams expect to reach a level of intimacy that will serve them and their organization through the ups and downs of a project’s lifecycle.
- Model and activate an environment that is overtly permissive of people being their full, authentic selves. Make it obvious and ask people to practice it in real time. The more leaders can boldly model this themselves, the better. Calling true authenticity out as a specific goal of the project and highlighting its personal and team benefits are good ways to accelerate it in practice.

To unbridle the team

There are a few ways a leader can create an inclusive and productive team culture:

- **Capitalize on Style** Assess and build an understanding of team member’s diverse individual working styles with a system like Deloitte’s Business Chemistry® to optimize communication, cooperation, and collaboration.
- **Get Closer** Challenge team members to get up close and personal by considering personal highs and lows in their lives and sharing the core values that resulted from them. Team members are much more likely to support each other, across traditional silos, when the group feels like a family.
- **Get Real** Create an environment that is glaringly all about personal authenticity. Model it as a leader and have people practice. Allow for no separation between the work self and the real self.



A new call for liftoff

The sprinter crosses the finish line. The swimmer touches the wall. The tennis player slams the final shot. These fateful moments of the finish go one of two ways in sports – win or lose, first place or not.

Of course, while countless factors influence the outcome for athletes in the world of sports, there is one specific moment commonly viewed to have legacy-defining impact on the end result – how they begin¹⁴⁻¹⁵. The same is true in the world of business and for projects big and small – the start matters.

This is no easy feat, as getting the start of a project right involves rallying a group around an ambition that comprises a shared vision and purpose, preparing the team to act openly and in unison amid dynamic changes and uncertainty, and bonding them as humans, not just as colleagues.

But by building these practices boldly and consciously into an immersive, surprising project launch experience, a leader can clearly signal a new 'game strategy' and set their teams up for a much higher, more exciting, and vastly more rewarding level of play.

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