Creating Your Political Plan

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Introduction

Project management goes beyond techniques to complete projects on time, scope, and budget. Improving organizational performance depends upon getting more accomplished through projects. Just what gets accomplished and how comes under the purview of power and politics. Organizations by their nature are political. To be effective, project managers need to become politically sensitive. This paper expands upon the concept of leading with power—as previously presented by one author to the 2004 PMI Global Congress (Englund, 2004)—by crafting a process to create a political plan. It draws upon years of experience as program managers in the high tech industry at Hewlett-Packard Company; the concepts continually apply and get enhanced through consulting work within a variety of industries.

Assessing the environment, rethinking attitudes towards power and politics, and developing an effective political plan are foundation steps. These help to address the power structure in an organization, identify critical stakeholder levels of trust and agreement, develop a guiding coalition, and determine areas of focus—actions that can take place in a project office (see Englund, Graham, Dinsmore, 2003). Drawing casual loops, both vicious and virtuous, helps depict consequences of behaviors.

Instead of lamenting about a failed project, program, or initiative, it is possible to learn about power and politics so that project success is optimized. Knowledge, wisdom and courage, combined with action, have the potential to change your approach to project work. The examples and insights shared in this paper can help turn potential victim scenarios into win-win political victories.

Conceptual Base

A common theme for success or failure of any organizational initiative is building a guiding coalition—a bonding of sponsors and influential people who support the project or initiative. This support, or not, represents a powerful force either toward or away from the goal. Gaining support means the difference between whether or not the goal is achieved. Moderate success may occur without widespread political support, but continuing long-term business impact requires alignment of power factors within the organization.

Organizations attempting projects across functions, businesses and geographies increasingly encounter complexities that threaten their success. A common response is to set up control systems—reports, measures, and rewards—that inhibit the very results intended. This happens when we violate natural laws, inhibit free flow of information, and impose unnecessary constraints. These external forces tend to drive out whatever motivation is naturally present within people.

In contrast, taming the chaos and managing complexity are possible when stakeholders establish a strong sense of purpose, develop shared vision and values, share information as an enabling factor, and adopt patterns that promote cooperation across cultural boundaries. These processes represent major change for many organizations.

Too late, people often learn the power of a non-guiding coalition. This happens when a surprise attack results in a resource getting pulled, a project manager is reassigned, or a project is cancelled. Getting explicit commitments up front, the more public the better, is important to implementing any project or initiative. It also takes follow through to maintain the commitment. But if commitment was not obtained initially, it is not possible to maintain throughout. It all starts by investigating attitudes and assessing how things get done.

Views of Politics

Albert Einstein said "Politics is more difficult than physics." Politics will be present anytime an attempt is made to turn a vision for change into reality. It is a fact of life, not a dirty word that should be stamped out. A common view is what happens with negative politics, which is a win-lose environment in an under-handed or without-your-knowledge-of-what's-happening approach. People feel manipulated, and the outcome is not desirable from their point of view. Secret discussions are more prevalent than public ones. Reciprocal agreements are made to benefit individuals rather than organizations.

Project managers who shy away from power and politics are not being all they can be. A big pitfall people fall into is not taking the time to fully assess what they are up against—learning how to operate effectively in a political environment.

What is a political environment? A negative reaction to the word "political" could be a barrier to success. Being political is not a bad thing when trying to get good things done for the organization. A political environment is the power structure, formal and informal. It is how things get done within the day to day processes as well as in a network of relationships. Power is the capacity each individual possesses to translate intention into reality and sustain it. Organizational politics is the exercise or use of power. Since project management is all about getting results, it stands to reason that power is required. Political savvy is a vital ingredient for every project manager's toolkit.

The political process is always at work in organizations. The political jungle is a chaotic environment. Success comes to those who identify the "animals" in the jungle and recognize that they exhibit certain traits and patterns. Each is driven by a purpose. Being effective with the "lions, tigers, and bears" involves working in their preferred operating modes, speaking their language, and aligning common purposes.

The challenge is to create an environment for positive politics. That is, people operate with a win-win attitude. All actions are out in the open. People demonstratively work hard toward the common good. Outcomes are desirable or at least acceptable to all parties concerned. Good, smart people, who trust each other (even if they do not always agree), getting together to solve clearly defined and important issues, guided by effective, facilitated processes, with full disclosure and all information out in the open, can accomplish almost anything. This is the view of power and politics being espoused in this writing.

Assessing the Political Environment

Understand the power structure in the organization. A view from outer space would not show the lines that separate countries or organizations or functional areas or political boundaries. The lines are man-made figments that exist in our minds or on paper but not in reality. Clues to a power structure may come from an organizational chart, but how things get done goes far beyond that. Influence exists in people's hearts and minds, where power derives more from legitimacy than from authority. Its presence occurs in the implementation of decisions.

Legitimacy is what people confer on their leaders. Being authentic and acting with integrity are factors a leader decides in relations to others, and legitimacy is the response from others. Position power may command respect, but ultimately how a leader behaves is what gains whole-hearted commitment from followers. Legitimacy is the real prize, for it completes the circle. When people accept and legitimize the power of a leader, greater support gets directed toward the outcome; conversely, less resistance is present.

People have always used organizations to amplify human power. Art Kleiner (2003) states a premise that in every organization there is a core group of key people—the "people who really matter"—in which the organization continually acts to fulfill the perceived needs and priorities of this group.

Kleiner suggests numerous ways to determine who these powerful people are. People who have power are at the center of the organization's informal network. They are symbolic representatives of the organization's direction. They got this way because of their position, their rank, their ability to hire and fire others. Maybe they control a key bottleneck or belong to a particular influential subculture. They may have personal charisma or integrity. These people take a visible stand on behalf of the organization's principles and engender a level of mutual respect. They dedicate themselves as leaders to the organization's ultimate best interests and set the organization's direction. As they think or act or convey an attitude, so does the rest of the organization. Their characteristics and principles convey what an organization stands for. These are key people who, when open to change, can influence an organization to move in new directions or, when not open to change, keep it the same.

Another way to recognize key people is to look for decision makers in the mainstream business of the organization. They may be aligned with the headquarters culture, ethnic basis, or gender, speak the native language, or be part of the founding family. Some questions to ask about people in the organization are: Whose interests did we consider in making a decision? Who gets things done? Who could stop something from happening? Who are the "heroes?"

Power is not imposed by boundaries. Power is earned, not demanded. Power can come from position in the organization, what a person knows, a network of relationships, and possibly from the situation, meaning a person could be placed in a situation that has a great deal of importance and focus at that moment.

A simple test for where power and influence reside is to observe who people talk to or go to with questions or for advice. Whose desk do people meet at? Who has a long string of voice or e-mail messages? Whose calendar is hard to get into?

One of the most reliable sources of power when working across organizations is the credibility a person builds through a network of relationships. It is necessary to have credibility before a person can attract team members, especially the best people, who are usually busy and have many other things competing for their time. Credibility comes from relationship building in a political environment.

In contrast, credibility gaps occur when previous experience did not fulfill expectations or when perceived abilities to perform are unknown and, therefore, questionable. Organizational memory has a lingering effect—people long remember what happened before and do not give up these perceptions without due cause. People more easily align with someone who has the power of knowledge credibility.

Power and politics also address the basic priority of project management's triple constraints—outcome, schedule, and cost. If the power in an organization resides in marketing where tradeshows rule new product introductions, meeting market window schedules becomes most important. An R&D driven organization tends to focus on features and new technology, often at the expense of schedule and cost.

Mapping Behavior

Stakeholder analysis is integral to a political plan. One format is to apply traits or characteristics of animals to people within the organization. This is proven to be a fun and less risky approach to sensitive topics. People quickly come to understand the challenges of dealing with these "animals."

For example, assess each individual for the degree of mutual trust and for agreement on the project or program's purpose, vision, and mission. That puts them in one of four quadrants. What sort of "animal" are they?

Tiger. Solitary, powerful, strong and skillful.

Lion.   Social, outgoing, approachable, roar to make claims.
Bear.   Solitary, intelligent, avoid people.
Venomous snake. Cold-blooded, ruthless when provoked.
Female black widow spider. Shy and solitary but venomous; eats weaker colleagues for breakfast.
Artic fox. Easy to recognize but hard to catch; manipulates with a smile.
Sheep. Herd animals; follow leaders willingly and produce what is required.
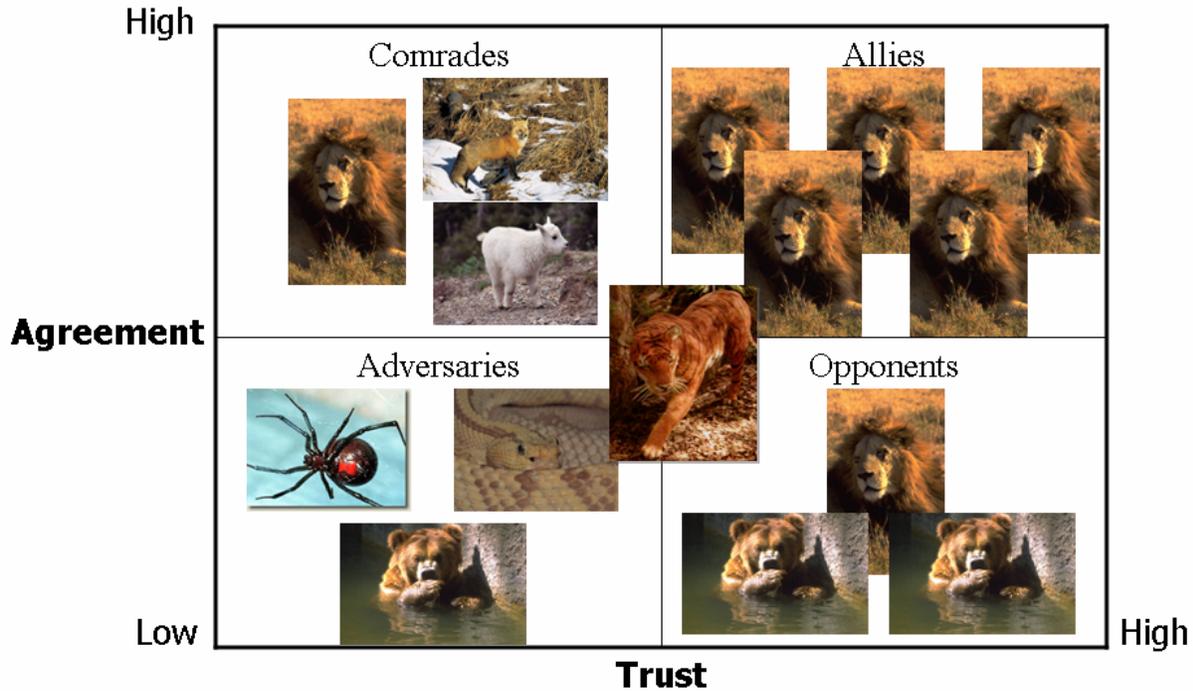

Exhibit 1. Stakeholder Grid

Ultimately the goal is to move everyone up and to the right on the grid in Exhibit 1. Start by reinforcing positions of strength and then work on areas of concern. Use the knowledge about traits and behavior patterns to address each stakeholder's needs, as well as to protect yourself when necessary.

With the above concepts in minds, the next task for the project leader is to apply political savvy within his or her environment. Difficult challenges that arise [similar to the tough questions we get from attendees in workshops] do not have simple answers, but effective action can be guided by applying the concepts of authenticity and integrity. These are fundamental concepts that get left out of our modern busy-ness. We may be tempted or pressured by short term expedient responses. However, imagine yourself five years in the future looking back on this time. What will you be most proud of? What will you remember—that you met a budget or did the right thing?

For example, it is easy to get caught in a vicious loop when there is no time to create a clear and widely understood business vision—daily actions consist of problem solving and fire fighting, often more driven by urgency than importance. Consequently, there is no consistent prioritization of work so the vast diversity of stuff that happens leaves even less time to prioritize. Choices are made in isolation [*three coins in a fountain—which one will she choose?*] which creates duplication of effort or gaps in the product line. This leads to unsatisfactory business results because the important things do not get done. We then come full circle around the loop to need a clear business vision. The trick is to break the loop somewhere.
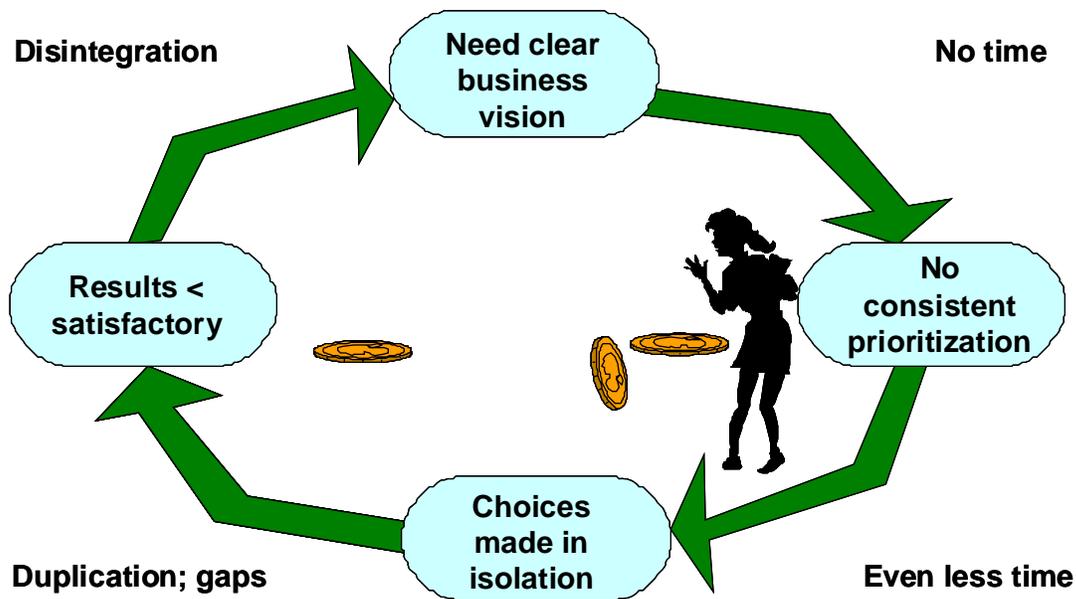
Exhibit 2. A vicious loop

Leaders, caught up in a vicious loop similar to Exhibit 2, combined with speaking without authenticity and committing 'integrity crimes,' shift the burden away from a fundamental solution to their effectiveness. Leaders have a choice to ignore fundamental values and get into a difficult predicament. Or else they can tap the energy and loyalty of others to succeed. The difference resides in whether you transparently act with authenticity and integrity.

In systems thinking terms, this predicament can be understood as a classic example of a "shifting the burden" archetype. Such an archetype is a pattern that helps explain recurring behaviors in human interactions. Shifting the burden is when applying a short-term fix actually undermines a leader's ability to take action at a more fundamental level. The causal loop, starting in the middle of Exhibit 3, depicts how many project leaders proceed when under pressure to get results. The quick fix (in balancing loop B1) is to resort to a command and control approach which on a surface level appears to lessen the pressure. However, this approach drives individuals to commit "integrity crimes" when they believe that what they say is more important than what they do. This has an opposite effect on the people they want to influence or persuade (in reinforcing loop R3). These people do not do their best work so more pressure is felt to get results.

Feedback is a powerful tool to guide behavior. Mapping behaviors shows how what we do comes back to help or hurt us. It also shows the ripple effect of multiple actions, in other words, how interdependent we are. These tools reinforce the need to be careful in what we do when interacting with others and also the power of changing behaviors simply by giving feedback to others about the consequences of their actions. This leads to self-correcting behaviors.

Know also that leadership, and subsequent followership, depends upon the emotional bonding and alignment that occurs among people, teams, and the organization. This becomes a primary role for leading in a political environment—developing skills of emotional intelligence and practicing "primal leadership" (Goleman, et al, 2002).
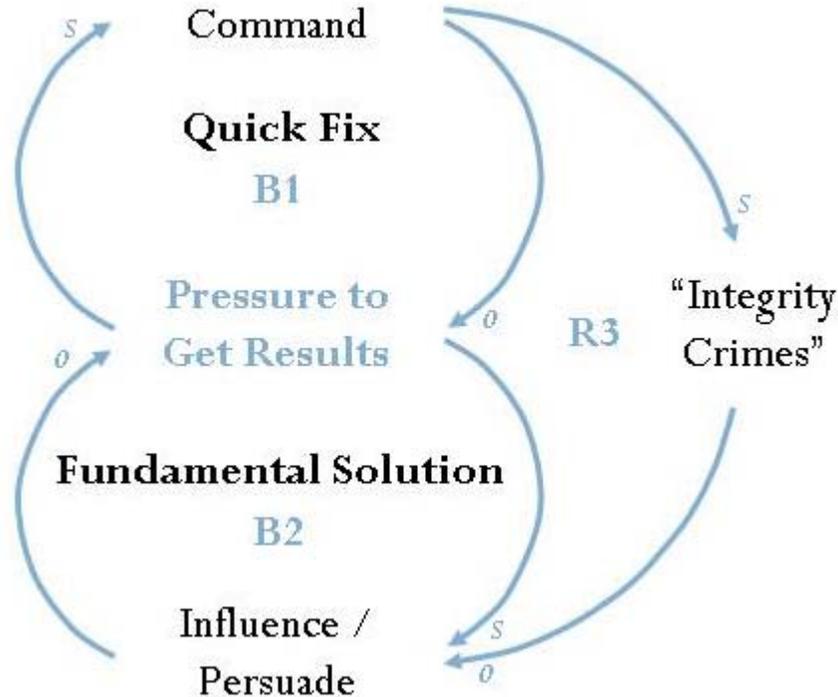
Exhibit 3. A "shifting the burden" causal loop

(*s* = supporting action, and *o* = opposite action)

The fundamental solution to the pressure to get results is to develop skills of persuasion as practiced by a change agent (in balancing loop B2). Help people come to believe in the vision and mission and aid them to figure out why it is in their best interest to put their best work into the project. People usually respond positively to this approach and accomplish the work with less pressure. Tap the innate talents residing in people and create a natural, living system environment where people and information move freely. This virtuous loop represents a political plan at its finest.

Authentic Leadership in Action

A fundamental solution to creating a political plan includes applying tools of influence and persuasion:

Reciprocity. Give an unsolicited gift. People will feel the need to give something back. Perhaps a big contract...or maybe just another opportunity to continue building a strong relationship.
Consistency. Draw people into public commitments, even very small ones. This can be very effective in directing future action. Ask for explicit commitments and be consistent to enforce them.
Social Validation. Let people know that implementing a project management methodology is considered 'the standard' by others. People often determine what they should do by looking at what others are doing.
Liking. Let people know that we like them and that we are likeable too. People like to do business with people they like. Elements that build 'liking' include physical attractiveness, similarity, compliments, and cooperation.
Authority. Be professional and personable. A suit and tie can do wonders. Other factors are experience, expertise, and scientific credentials. Tap referential power by being publicly named as the program manager by someone high up in the organization; use that connection to get the attention of

others.

Scarcity. Remember just how rare good program practice is, not to mention people who can transform a very culture. Not everyone knows what it takes to make a program successful. Stand out as a person willing to do the right things in the right ways.

A summary of the science and practice of persuasion (Cialdini, 2000): *It usually makes great sense to repay favors, behave consistently, follow the lead of similar others, favor the requests of those we like, heed legitimate authorities, and value scare resources*.

Authenticity means that people believe what they say. Integrity means that they do what they say they will do, and for the reasons they stated to begin with. Authenticity and integrity link the head and the heart, the words and the action; they separate belief from disbelief, and often make the difference between success and failure. Many people in organizations lament how their "leaders" lack authenticity and integrity. When that feeling is prevalent, trust cannot develop, and optimal results are difficult if not impossible to achieve. (Graham, Englund, 2004)

Integrity is the most difficult—and the most important—value a leader can demonstrate. Integrity is revealed slowly, day-by-day, in word and deed. Actions that compromise a leader's integrity often have swift and profound repercussions. Every leader is in the "spotlight" of those they lead.   As a result, shortcomings in integrity are readily apparent. Political leaders who "failed" often did so not by their deeds but by integrity gaps.

Consider these steps:

- Identify basic leadership traits and their consequences; know yourself
- Assess and compare leadership approaches in complex situations; practice developing judgment by simulating what you would do and comparing that to what respected leaders actually did
- Break the vicious loop somewhere; then apply a shifting the burden structure to create a positive culture
- Appreciate the value of authentic leadership and commit to act with integrity

> **Example "Integrity Crimes"**
> A manager giving a pep talk to the project team on the [unrealistic] "merits" of doing an 18 month project in 6 months
> Starting a meeting with a stated intention but diverting it to meet another assignment
> Passing along senior managements statements to the rank and file that the speaker is not in agreement with
> Ending [every] telephone conversation with "Someone's at my desk so I have to go now"
> Requiring weekly milestones to be met, promising feedback and customer reviews but not providing it
> Directing a [new] standard methodology to be used but not training people on it
> Promising a contract for the following week but not sending it
> …
> Each of these creates a sense of being violated in the minds of the recipients.

It becomes painfully evident when team members sense a disconnect between what they and their leaders believe is important. Energy levels drop, and productive work either ceases or slows down.

These managers display aspects of a common challenge—becoming a victim of the measurement and reward system. The axiom goes—"show me how people are measured and I'll show you how they behave." People have inner voices that reflect values and beliefs that lead to authenticity and integrity. They also experience external pressures to get results. The test for a true leader is to balance the internal with external pressures and to demonstrate truthfulness so that all concerned come to believe in the direction chosen. Know that people generally will work anytime and follow anywhere a person who leads with authenticity and integrity—be that person. Measurement systems need to reflect authentically on the values and guiding principles of the organization. Forced or misguided metrics and rewards do more harm than good. Be aware of unintended consequences.

Prepare a Political Plan

The concepts discussed in this paper can be formatted into the sample, filled-in template on the following page.

Consider dealing with politics like playing a chess game. While you are conscious about the role and power coming from each chess piece, success in the game depends upon your movements and the movements of your adversary. Project managers need to be good chess players because that way they will be able to influence people in organizations. Author Bucero (alfonso.bucero@abucero.com) discovered the similarities between a project and a chess game on a recent vacation. His eight year old son knew how to identify who has the power in each movement and was able to use it. Sometimes he failed, other times not. That is a typical scenario for project managers.

Summary

Leading with power is a learned skill. Many organizations lack good political "swimmers." It involves assessment, identification, skill-building, planning, and application. Like all learning it involves movement between reflection and action. Creating your political plan starts with making a commitment to lead with power, most probably personal power. It continues by taking action to identify sources of power, perform stakeholder analysis, and apply the values of authenticity and integrity. Look systematically at the environment which may be depicted as a vicious loop. Instead, create a virtuous loop based upon tools of persuasion and influence. Trust cannot develop and even quests to implement enterprise project management remain a fiction until leaders create an environment that supports these qualities. Take the time to document a political plan, noting your observations and deciding upon action steps.

References

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Political Plan slides and templates. http://www.englundpmc.com and www.madelinelearning.com.

My [SAMPLE] Political Plan

•Assessment of environment

We are a "loose-tight" organization with a moderately weak project culture. Power is relatively diffused and no one person dominates team meetings. People with initiative can step up and succeed but few of these efforts are coordinated across the organization. Ineffective and inefficient processes are a big problem.

•Description of political jungle

The tigers stay out of our way. The lions roars are not heard very far, and the bears seem to run the show, doing their own thing. Venomous attacks can come from anywhere, especially when traversing in new territories.

•Stakeholder roles

Sponsors are assigned but do not actively support projects unless asked. Team members lack full commitment to the project because of other distractions. Senior management is just beginning to understand the value of project and program management to the vitality of the organization.

•Potential issues

Too many projects threatens successful completion. Requirements change when managers cater to special interests. Vague understanding of roles & responsibilities creates confusion and leads to missed milestones. Few commitments exist to follow through on project plans.

•Approach to stakeholders and issues

Need to get tigers involved in supporting program management and a project portfolio process. Need to harness the lions to roar in concert by focusing on a limited set of strategic goals and corresponding projects. The bears will continue to perform as long as we do not disturb them too greatly with complex processes or detailed checklists.

•Strategic response, such as positioning and steps

A small project office reporting to the general manager can facilitate the introduction of simple portfolio and project management processes. Get the attention of the lions by pointing out the consequences in the market if we fail to systematically coordinate our efforts. Neutralize negative [venomous] behaviors by an open approach to all issues and the free flow of information.

•Action plans

Interview all stakeholders. Prepare proposal. Line up upper management support. Define the project sponsor role and conduct training for new sponsors. Develop an environment where excellence in project sponsorship contributes to competitive advantage. Select strategic efforts leading first to small wins before rolling out more broadly. Get explicit commitments from all stakeholders. Remember to be authentic and act with integrity on every interaction.

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