81. Project Teams in a VUCA Context
from the 2020 UMD Symposium

Steven Gruyters, Al Zeitoun, Harry Zolkower

Steven Gruyters: Yeah, I would say the goal is really you want to be the best version of yourself; you do not want to be the best version of somebody else, because that may not be attainable.

Harry Zolkower: And the question becomes, do you feel strongly enough to take action? And when you take the action, are you willing to take the consequences?

Al Zeitoun: The reason certain advisors or certain consultancies, etc. do a better job than others, they are not just responding, they are shaping a place in the future for their clients that the client has not seen yet.

Kendall Lott: Volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous. Yeah, it goes without saying today, doesn't it? For this final episode of our 2020 series from the University of Maryland's annual project management symposium, we focus on managing projects effectively in our current VUCA environment: fast-paced, constantly shifting. And for all of the speed and adaptability that we know is needed, what we learn in this episode is that situational awareness and context generally is the key. PMs have a unique and valuable view of what's going on, both at the comprehensive and detailed level. They have to be able to prioritize and make good decisions, and communicate and facilitate good decision-making up the chain.

We highlight three presentations from three different tracks of the symposium: People in Projects; Agile & IT; and Stakeholder Management. All three presenters feel the urgency of the moment and the need for organizations to function nimbly, which requires their leaders to maintain an honest and up-to-date assessment of the internal operations, as well as the external landscape. You will hear an analogy to airplane pilots more than once. So fasten your seat belts. There's a lot to take in, and time is of the essence.

Announcer: From the Washington DC chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View®, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here is your host, Kendall Lott.

KL: Steven Gruyters partners with visionary leaders to design and deliver enterprise transformation initiatives geared toward speed, flexibility and maximum business value. He's currently booting up ZZEE Partners, a coaching and education firm focused on optimizing how people work together to unlock potential and improve outcomes. His presentation uses the Curse of the Spotify Model as his jumping off point to tackle the challenging business of building effective teams by not mimicking others.

Steven Gruyters (02:37): There's a very famous case study that was written in 2012 that describes

how the company Spotify was growing and scaling Agility in their organization. It is still something that's widely used by Agile coaches and other management gurus, who present it as the gold standard of how we could scale Agility within your company. What I want to do, though, is place it in the right context.

SG (03:10): Spotify is, first and foremost, a technology company. They were founded in 2006, and launched their product that we all know and love in love in 2008. They were very much an emerging culture at the time that this case study was written. They were growing from about 300 employees in 2001 to about 1000 employees in 2013.

But the key point here is that the Spotify model that I showed, it works for them, in their situation, at that point in time. But that does not mean it necessarily fits to your current situation. I'm just using it as an example of holding yourself to an unattainable standard. You may have all the best intentions to improve your ways of working. But applying somebody else's model or theory that not fit your context, will not get you where you want to go. And that's the Curse of the Spotify Model.

KL (04:19): What made you actually do this presentation?

SG: So I'll tell you a little bit of the back story. So, I started to learn about Agile and Scrum well over 10 years ago, and it really, when I first started to learn about it, it really resonated with me. Since I recognized a lot of the elements of projects that I had been running or been a part of, that made me successful in the past.

So at the time, I was working for this large multi-national. I started their first large-scale multi-year Agile Program, and we were very successful. We learned a lot in the process, it was really a very good experience. But then we started to scale this more throughout the organization, and that's when we started to hit some more challenges.

As I started to find some answers to those challenges, I actually was a little surprised, the advice that I was getting from various consultancies, Agile coaches and the like, was typically to just bring it back to some standard best practice that you would get in sort of the one-on-one classes, or you would get case studies from other companies, and so on. And my frustration was that that advice was not wrong, per se, it was just not something that I could apply in my particular situation.

So that really set me out on a quest to figure out what does actually help in my particular situation. And I found that a lot of our companies are sort of facing similar types of challenges, which, then, fast forward, leads me to this presentation, where I try to share some of the strategies that worked for me.

KL (**05:59**): Yeah, and when I was reviewing – I reviewed it a couple of times now – and I thought, you know what? The title of this for me was "Reality Bites." I think you were looking at like, there's a little bit of a realism that all of us leaders need to be paying attention to.

Steve was presenting, and he opens with a great message around tennis playing, because... and he says, There I was being amazing and losing matches. So I'd lose matches and have a hard time understanding why.

SG (06:31): I want to take you back to the early 1990s. So picture me on the court as a young man.

My opponent serves. I hit a good return. The ball comes back to me in the middle of the court, I take a few steps forward, and I attack the ball. My point and I'm feeling great. Yet, I would go on to lose the match. Early in my career, this was the story of way too many of my matches, and I had a hard time understanding why. I was clearly, had the better strokes. I was faster, more aggressive, yet I would lose the match. I would watch professional players on TV, see how they played, what strategies they used, what patterns they played, and try to emulate that on the court, but really to know effect.

So what I didn't realize, though, that all this is actually backed by research. Simon Ramo wrote this book in 1973. In this, he details a study that he conducted on looking at how professional tennis players play their matches, and compared that to amateur tennis players, and how they play and win their matches.

So professional players win their matches by scoring more points, which seems very obvious. But what it really means is, they are so equally matched to their opponent, and playing such a high, consistent level, that the way that they win their matches is by hitting winners, and scoring, actively going out and scoring points. His biggest finding, though, was that it is quite a different story for amateurs. For amateur players, or ordinary players, as he calls them, 80% of the points are lost and not won. What that means is one of the players will just make a mistake – hit the ball wrong, hit it in the net or leave an easy points for the other to finish. So in fact, the best strategy for amateur players to win the match is focus on not losing the match, by making fewer mistakes.

So professionals, if they want to improve their game, they focus on their attack and their strengths, even further sharpening their attacks, further strengthening some of the weapons they have. And that's what I was trying to do as a young man, trying to focus on my winning shots. Where I could have seen a much bigger payoff, though, is if I had focused on consistency, or addressing some of my weaknesses in my game, or just in general making fewer unforced errors. So that really means that while professionals and amateurs, they're playing the same game, the strategy that they used to win their matches is completely and totally different.

KL (09:31): We're always trying to win, but it turns out there's two major families of strategies here, and speak to that a little bit if you'd like.

SG: Companies like Amazon or Apple or Netflix or Google or Spotify, they're all technology companies. And they haven't been around for that long, so their technology's all based on modern architectures. They can move quickly and so on, that's just part of their DNA. But if you work for a company that's 100 years old and has IT or a technology stack that's pretty close to that 100 years old, you're just limited to how fast you can move, how quickly you can change. And that's just the technology side. You can say the same around culture, how people make decisions, what drives their decisions, and so on.

KL: I liked how you framed it in your analogy, that was just really such a good punch line for everyone: Pros are at a level where they need to get an edge, using the skills they have to win. Amateurs need not to screw up and lose points. Now I don't know that we want to think of ourselves as amateurs, but I think you're talking about being best fit for something.

SG: Yeah, I would say the goal is really you want to be the best version of yourself.
 You do not want to be the best version of somebody else, because that may not be attainable. Take

your specific strengths, your competitive advantage, and exploit that as much as possible, and not focus on somebody else's model, because that may…There may be some good elements that you can take from that and learn from that, and mix them up and apply them in your setting. But you can't just take it on a one-to one basis.

KL (11:20): You were noting that self-organizing teams is often held up as like, This is what you need to do. Get a team moving that knows how to move without a lot of oversight, and can perform, focused on the goals, knowing what their strengths are, and moving forward. And you reflected what that looks like. And then you left us with the question, "So is that the real situation before you?"

SG (11:43): I'm want to talk about self-managing teams. So the typical definition is probably something like, "Self-managing teams are self-selecting, self-organizing and stable." What it means, self-selecting means they select their own team members; self-organizing means they organize their own work; and stable just means they stay together for a long period of time. What is often not said, or sort of glossed over, is that there's actually a number of other things that need to be in place as well, or assumptions that go into it that need to be in place in order for this to be successful.

So these teams need to understand the context they're operating in. They need to understand the context of the business, the strategy of the business, the goals of the project. And of course they need to understand the business process, not just what is the general trend within the industry, know what is your specific business process, where some of the pain points, where are some of the strengths today. And again, what's the goal? What are you trying to achieve? Also, they need to understand the technology landscape. What's your current architecture, with, again, some strengths and weaknesses? What's your future vision, which direction are you going to go with your technology?

This may not really line up to the reality you have in your organization. And your teams may have a mix of internal employees with contractors, with vendors and other third parties doing pieces of the work. You may have subcontracted pieces of work to external parties. So, in addition to this, your teams may be operating in more of a command and control type of culture, or a hierarchical culture, within the established organization. So while you may have a self-managing team, that team may not actually believe their truly allowed to self-manage.

SG (13:47): So here are some of the things you can look for: First and foremost, no clarity on goals. If you connect with your team, you talk to each individual and just ask them, "Hey, what's the goal of the project? What are we trying to do? What's the next milestone we're working through?" And if you start getting a lot of different answers from your team members, that's definitely a red flag.

Secondly, poor communication. If the team is not making an effort to make sure that every single person is heard, and that everybody's voice and everybody's opinion is heard, that's an issue. Especially in today's situation, where we sort of unexpectedly had to transition to this remote way of working. I'm sure you've all been on either video calls or phone conferences, where multiple people speak at the same time. And what you may have also realized is that, if that happens, it's actually always the same people that end up speaking, and the same people that end up not speaking. And if the team is, either consciously or unconsciously, not making the effort to make sure that the people that are not speaking, that their voice is heard as well, that means you have a

communication challenge in your project.

Second point I want to make on communication is if people are really speaking from a desire to sort of convince and prove their point and win the argument, rather than from a perspective of trying to find the best solution for whatever the problem is you're trying to solve, whether that solution comes from your or from somebody else.

And thirdly, then, no commitment to the team. Is nobody volunteering to pick up assignments? Is nobody actually taking responsibility for the things that they're supposed to be responsible for? Or if a team member needs help, everybody sort of looks the other way, and people are not really trying to help out.

SG (15:55): If you observe some of these behaviors in your team, what is the suggestions of the theory around self-managing teams and how to address these? Well, self-managing teams, you would say things like, "You need to work on culture with your team." "Increase shared values within your team." "You need to create an agile mindset, or a growth mindset."

The challenge with that is actually that some of these things are kind of nebulous, and a little hard to pin down. And a second challenge is that these things take a very long time. And thirdly, if you're somewhere in the middle of implementing this, and your team composition changes, it's like hitting a reset button and you have to restart a whole bunch of these activities.

So, how can you address some of the challenges within the reality that you're living in?

KL (17:00): We actually may be harming ourselves by aiming at the wrong standard. We're actually not getting to our goals. I need to focus on the best strategy that gets what I need, and it's not about doing it the way someone else did it.

SG: Absolutely.

KL: It's really about what are the outcomes that I expect from this organization or this group, or this team or myself, right? Our goal probably is to maximize the outcome that I should be able to perform to or be able to get, and that may not mean taking on the received wisdom.

SG: Yes. I would draw one other parallel. So typically people also start to talk about that this is really culture. Well, the thing that culture is it takes a long time to change a culture, and typically a lot of the literature that you can read around culture is really more from an, sort of operational departments type of perspective. Not from a project management perspective. So investing in your culture and looking to make changes is something that takes years before you can really see a significant impact in a company level culture. So if you take the lens of, you're a CEO of a company and your goal is that that company will exist for the next 100 years, that's a great investment of your time and effort. But if you're taking the lens of a project manager that's assembling a project team that stays together for the next three to six months, and it's produced results straight away, that's a completely different story.

I have to say, in my 20-plus year is in the business, I've never seen a truly self-selecting team. Not that I wouldn't like to get there. But even in larger corporations, you typically work with...

You pull what we call resources, but really mean people, from a center of excellence, or a resource group and what not. And while the ideal state is that team sort of self-selects their own people, the reality is often you have to work with the team that you get, not the team that you per se the team that you would like to have.

KL: What our goal is, is creating productive team members.

SG: Yes, so what you're really looking for is, you're trying to find ways, what helps you improve the most right now in your situation at this point in time.

SG: So what would I do here? I would focus on creating a set of productive team members. And when I say productive team members, I mean professionals and adults, working together to create the outcome that we're looking for. And one of the fastest ways to do that is, as a project manager, or as a scrum master, or whatever, act as a facilitator of the communication. If you help facilitate some of the communication within the team, it sort of acts as a shortcut to improve communication pretty much immediately, and also create some sort of semblance of psychological safety within the team, which then will probably have some self-reinforcing effects and you start seeing more positive payoff out of that.

KL (20:15): You talk about the specific playbook to do that, to make it real. You call it out: Make…the first step. I love this one. I'm in fact, having to deal with it myself some: to make the implicit explicit.

SG: Making the implicit explicit. With that, I mean things like, This is how we do stuff around here. This is how we want to work together. So you can formalize this, and just write it down together with the team as part of working agreements. And I think this is especially relevant if you're working with multiple teams, cross-functional teams that generally do not work together. Because they're not used to collaboration.

KL: What are some examples of what you would uncover there, so people can get a clear, concrete sense of something that is likely implicit that you have seen, or you might expect to become explicit.

SG: So the different working agreements that you can come up with, which is things, especially now, we're mostly working in a remote setting, what are some of our working hours? Which hours do we want to have meetings in? What's the preferred way of us communicating together? What are our boundaries? Do we want to make sure we don't work all hours of the day? Because that's a very big risk at this point in time, where there's just not a lot of disconnect between your work life and your home life, because they're all colliding at the moment.

SG (21:50): And lastly, create situational awareness in your team. Situational awareness is a term that originated in the Air Force. What it means is, rather than being just simply focused on your mission or your goal, you also need to be aware of your surroundings at any given point in time. You have to have kind of a very close eye out for all the other airplanes that are around you. You also need to be aware of where are you compared to the ground, or compared to other obstacles like mountains. You need to monitor your fuel load. Imagine if you're in a combat situation, where people are actively trying to shoot you from the sky. Now, I'm hoping that nobody in your project is trying to kill you, but I think it's still very important for you to create situational awareness in your

project on things like...What are the boundaries of your project? What are some of the guardrails or non-negotiables? Is it more important to deliver solution impacts, or is it more important to deliver a comprehensive solution? There's no absolute right or wrong answer there, but it's important that you're clear on what's the most important in that particular situation, in that particular point in time.

SG (23:10): It's very important to understand these things at the start of the project. And the reason for that is, once you are later in the project and something unexpectedly happens, and your project is now under pressure to deliver and your timeline's under pressure, your budget, your scope, whatever is under pressure, that's not the time to have those discussions. It's too late to have those discussions of what's really important. But if you already have had those discussions with your team and you now understand what is key, that allows you to move very quickly, to make the right decisions quickly and pivot to continue with your project. And that, what I found, can also be very much the difference between success and failure.

KL: This is almost agenda item one or two on a kick-off meeting, when the team comes together.

SG: Yes, but what I would add to that is, you need to make it real. So I've been to too many kick-offs or too many conversations where these things are discussed, and it's just sort of a copy/paste out of the project charter and things along those lines, and it may be what your sponsors are telling you, that's what the goals are, and what the trade-offs are. But is that what it really is? That's really the difference. You want to get that layer deeper, to truly understand, is that really where some of the pain points are, right? You may say that, Oh, delivering fast is more important than a comprehensive solution. But when the rubber hits the road, is that really the case? There is still that truly minimum viable product. What is truly the minimum viable? Let's really dig into that and start to understand that. Not what it says on the Power Point slide or in your project charter. Let's really try to understand what's the absolute minimum that we need, as a business, to be able to function.

KL (25:12): I want to clarify then, when this model that you're proposing, this idea that we don't hold ourselves up to a gold standard of, in this case, self-organizing teams that are high performers in that sense, when does this pertain?

SG: So when you look at a team and, assuming your team has a certain set of skills and experience, and that's sort of a given. You have a certain composition of your team, and then they have a certain set of context around understanding of how they understand the goals of the project, the context, the business process, and so on. That, the combination of that, I would call the potential of the team. Potential that the team has, but it's not yet realized. And that potential would not be realized unless they can effectively work together.

KL: Yeah, to take this back to your analogy, you just really locked it in for me right there. This is not about finding what the pros do, and mimicking that. It's actually finding your potential, and that's what we're doing when we pull a team together.

SG: Absolutely.

KL: So Spotify is amazing, we get it. But obviously the tactics that made that organization so successful don't apply to every team or organization. Most of us will never reach such heights – well, really, *their* heights – no matter how much we study and try to emulate them. You and your team can reach your own heights, however, based on an accurate and honest analysis of your

organization, the parameters of your project, and the capabilities and chemistry of the team you have. Your goal as a PM is to harness as best you can, their full potential.

To learn more about Steven's approach to team building, you can read several of his excellent and concise articles at ZZEEpartners.com.

KL (27:04): Contributions to value through autonomous systems mindset. I'm all grins just saying the words, as Al Zitoun tells us how we can handle VUCA by focusing on contributions to value and thinking in this context. Al is a business optimization and operational performance excellence leader, with global experiences in strategy execution. He's worked with organizations all around the world, developing enterprise digital transformation and Program Management Offices.

Al Zeitoun (27:32): Our session talks about The Focused Leader. So this applies across a multitude disciplines. What does it take for me to really be that focused leader? What kind of agility, what kind of change in mindset I would need to have? And what is the full opportunity going forward into that project economy? Especially when we talk about the times we're in. So there is a theme around being the change-maker that's going to come out of this discussion. If anybody will be driving the change, in my opinion, it is the project managers.

AZ (28:03): We cannot just go approach the project or an initiative, or a challenge or a problem with the same old way of saying, I'm going to do it this way. This whole notion of, you know, stuck to one way, and thinking that it's going to work time again across projects, that's not going to be the case.

The focused leader is the most experimenting type leader that I can think of. Whether you see the Spotify story, which I highly recommend you watch, some of the elements of how Spotify did their engineering, how they...through the mobilizing, and also focused heavily on the level of autonomy, that's what the project economy is going to need. It is going to need more of that.

KL (28:43): What do you mean the project economy?

AZ: It's an outcome-based effort that ultimately leads to some benefit and value to organizations. So reality is, and especially as you go into a world that has events like the Covid-19 type events and other events that have changed the way the world has, and continues to work, we're not going to see the way of working as usual. We're going to see much more of what organizations want to get done in small chunks, in buckets, in what we call project initiatives. The name is less of the issue, but the nature of the work is much more component-driven. You're almost like having to bucket what you do, because you want to experiment faster, you want to release results faster, you want to make sure that you are not investing a penny or an effort or any amount of time without tying it to a clear testing environment. And I don't see anything better for testing than the projects.

KL: So it seems to me that project economy really means, it's the…how we get things done now. You're saying there's much more things are projected, the work we do, which is now all in projects, or so much of it is in projects, and hence you're calling it "project economy."

AZ: I can agree with that. I actually predict the title "project management" as you and I know it will likely disappear in no longer than maybe another 5-10 years at best. It's more how we lead, how we operate, how we think, and how we give that system mindset to be the way of operating. So it's a

very autonomous way of working, because it does mean that you let go, that you as a leader can easily step back.

KL (30:21): So in this presentation that you gave, what actually is your thesis?

AZ: In this day and age…In this day and age, that means into 2040 as the least, we're going to continue to operate in a very volatile uncertain world. We cannot exist in 2040 unless you figure out exactly a way about which you can a) be much more focused in figuring out exactly your contributions to creating value, or b) that you're also able to do that while you are super adaptable and super dynamic, and very willing to be known as not having the right answer, and you rely on others to help you be smarter and provide better answers for your community and for your organization.

So to me, in this presentation, what I highlight a lot is the importance of context as well. There is nothing that I found that I need to develop more, personally as a leader as well, than the ability to zoom in and out. Almost like what I call getting onto the balcony versus being on the dance floor. We're on the dance all the time. And if events like Covid or the VUCA world that we live in, etcetera, does not give us the jolt, almost, that we need to have a much better ability to be more responsible for how we think and when we think, and how to create that ability to step away, see it holistically, and then be able to jump right back in as a good project or a leader should continue to have into the future, then we are missing something for sure, in terms of value creation.

AZ (31:50): One takeaway that I hope we get out of the discussion today is the agility. Experiment or else. I'm not talking even "Agile," pure Agile implementation, or Extreme Agile. I'm talking literally about agility in multitudinal dimensions, on the organization side, the mindset side. I don't believe that there is actually a room going forward, where we have the rigid mindset. This whole notion about a growth mindset, and what they do is to truly use that notion, even as a leader, even in your projects and program, it's almost a must going forward, right?

But that requires a certain culture. That requires a certain understanding in the organization to enable that. Transparency is a key component of that environment, and that agility. I can't fully be there without it. And one that's very important also is the last one, to continuously adjust the way of working in alignment with context. I can't emphasize it enough. Reading the room, as we say. Understanding fully where the stakeholder's mind is. Not what's written. Not what the documents say. It's truly understanding the bigger context.

AZ (32:59): I look at this as a culture, as a system, and as people, right? So somewhere in the presentation, you see my balance between the process side and my... the government side and the people side. But in reality, the better wording would be even, "Hey, we want to have a different culture in our organizations, this project economy requires of us to create a different culture. Right? Secondly, we have to really think about systems very differently, and it's not just a pure methodology or a framework. You've got to find the fitting system. The key word in the English vocabulary, in my opinion, when it comes to this, is "F-I-T." The right fit. And then ultimately the people.

KL: You lay out a nice little chart where you say, "Look, there are three attributes and we stretch those across people, process, and governance." Digital Appetite. Smart Decision-making, which I think meant actually have data associated with it. And Refreshed Sponsorship Model. These are the

lenses that we need to focus on to see that our organization is trying to achieve, or is accepting excellence. And we know we have to move in this direction.

AZ (34:01): So think about it, it's really three critical attributes is what I chose. One is the digital appetite. You've seen over the years also how PMI has added what's referred to as the digital layer. And if you haven't seen that, that's a part of the work PMI has been doing it for the last couple of years, in terms of adding that layer onto the talent triangle. But it's a must. I mean, the reality is, even though you may not have to develop the expertise as a leader fully to have what's needed from a pure science standpoint, you still have to deal with what the data says.

The second component goes back to this smart decision-making. And the emphasis there is on Smart. What's does that really mean? Is that only speed? Is that only by building on number one, the digital? Is that a combination of other things? Yes, it is.

The most important one of the three, to be honest, is what I refer to as the Refreshed Sponsorship Model. Think about a classic boardroom, and completely turn that upside down. Think about a boardroom where people are sitting back in their chairs and entertaining themselves with a presentation, to a completely, very much engaged – but not engaged in the meddling we used to worry about in our early years as project managers and PMOs – but engaged the right way. Engaged in driving what we exactly want to have in the culture and the DNA of these excellent organizations. So they need be rolling up their sleeves, they need to have white boards everywhere in the boardrooms.

Whether you go fully Agile or scale Agile, or whatever decisions you make, it's less the approach, and it's more, "Is the context really beneficial to my organization?" And of course, this notion about strong, completely transparent and direct feedback. Organizations that are going to be excellent, they're going to have to rethink entirely how they develop their feedback. We're not talking 360, or advanced 360, etc. But we're talking about exactly what would it take to, at any given point, to know exactly what's happening in the organization and how well, as a full unit of focused leaders we are operating as well.

AZ (36:03): Getting an organization focused, and getting those leaders focused, cannot be done without a very clear linkage to how these projects are truly in place or how those initiatives, whether they're projects, programs, etcetera, how are they truly in the mix of the linkage back to being strategic, being able to support the organization. Because, if we see them as strategic vehicles, if we have the right support in the organization, etcetera, we are going to be also in a place where we can innovate. We can change. If projects and leaders truly create the impact they want to create in the project economy, they have to be change-makers, right?

And change, to me, is innovation. Walk into a project team setting or a meeting, you can tell right away, is this an energized team? Energy will not come because they have a good time, or they have done a good job, which is all good and helpful. Energy comes from true focus. True co-relationship between what we do and the impact we create. So when I look at the equation, Innovation = Ideas + Execution + Adoption – that, to me, is what has to happen in every project or program. Otherwise, it's a waste.

KL (37:12): You say innovation is energy, and that that becomes a definition of success in a project economy. Why is this an important heuristic in your sense? That we have innovation, and that

innovation is generated in this? This idea as execution and adoption concept?

AZ: Instead of saying, I want us to fail more, I want us to learn fast, or fail fast and learn, or any of the sayings that we have tended to, I really believe the opportunity for the project economy, and for the leaders in that economy, is for them to become better experimenters. If they experiment more, if they are able to really improve and strengthen those muscles, innovation is going to be a no-brainer.

KL: Now, the punch line to getting to innovation was energy. And you get energy by focus, or rather, you consolidate it. So this concept of focus to me was that you don't fritter away your effort.

AZ: The smartest and the most adaptable leaders, they are sharp enough to realize that every ounce of their energy needs to be spent the right way. That's where focus comes in. So a focused leader is, I don't like to use the word ruthless, but it's really a person who can do ruthless prioritization at any given point. And he or she is able to do that so quickly, that's where that adaptability comes in.

The element here that may have not have jumped out completely, given the time of that presentation, it's all about expedited decision-making as well. That focused leader is able, on her feet, to make the toughest decisions, and they make it based on the reasonable amount of data. But they also have a massive amount of risk-taking. This is where their autonomy is. We're talking about risk-seeking types of individuals. That's where the future is going to take us. But the reality is, with AI and everything else we have in the mix, we don't have to waste our time in other things we used to waste our time doing. So, I hope that gets us close, at least.

KL: The older methodology, to me, was managers are good when they know how to get the information they need to make good decisions, and then be able to communicate those and have engaged in doing it. And what we've realized, I think is, is no, no, no, no. If we have all the right information, actually, it can be automated. I mean, with an Excel spreadsheet, forget AI. Right? It's actually the ability to make decisions *without* all the right information.

AZ: Yeah, you're right. Either without all the right information, or with incomplete information. *And* not realizing – or not forgetting, actually – realizing and not forgetting, you're doing this *with* people and *for* people. That's where the context is. And that's where the people side of the equation has also got to be, right smack in the center.

AZ (39:49): If I'm a focused leader, and am not intentional in everything I do, and every communication I send, and every example I'm driving. there's something that needs to be rethought through here, right? So this intentionality, in a way, it could be a very good summary to that focused leader.

They are really comfortable making decisions. Think about the world we live in again. Think about any operation or program or initiative or a complex matter at hand. How important is decision-making? And how important that that is well thought through, yet to the point and fast? The time aspect is so important. In a day and age where we have AI, analytics and machine learning, etcetera, we should have been so much more focused on how can we sharpen our decision-making muscles? I should be, at any given point, literally like a cockpit of a plane there, you know this over-used, at the time, dashboard setup, to be real. They need to be allowing us to experiment even more.

KL (40:48): At least in the service sector that I'm in, I have to be responsive to the needs of a client.

And that's what shapes my need for alignment and autonomy, and how I will collaborate, and how I need to receive feedback or have others, as we build as a team to respond. How much of this needs to be shaped or how can you connect it to the issues of the market? To how we receive requirements for the value we are producing? Because, as my note says, companies don't exist in a vacuum.

AZ: Yeah, actually, it's one of those things, we are almost saying the same thing differently. So I'm glad they're actually positioning this way, because of course you cannot do it in isolation from your market and from your clients, etcetera. And if anything, one of the key messages in the presentation, when I mentioned empathy a couple of times, that really is tied very much around the sensing and responding better. If you're not sensing, as a focused leader, where truly the market and your clients are taking your, or are expecting you to take them to – because remember again, part of, if you talk about the example of service, the reason certain advisory, certain consultancies, etcetra, do a better job than others, they're not just responding, they are shaping a place in a future for their clients that the client has not seen yet.

So that's why, you know when we talked about the digital appetite, and we talked about the role of data and expedited decision-making, etc., all of that, is to take all of that out of the mix, so you're highly focused on being empathetic and highly connected to not only your current immediate demands or challenges or constraints of the market or of the limitations that are coming from all kinds of volatilities, but to also be shaping a place that doesn't exist yet.

KL (42:28): In a project economy, PMs reign supreme. We are the designated change-makers. That's the great news. But Al's point to me is that we need to take this responsibility seriously, with the discipline to be experimental, agile and quintessentially focused, zooming in and out to gather the necessary intel to expedite decision-making.

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KL: Harry Zolkower is a Project Manager with many years of experience in many sectors of business, both public & private, and for-profit & nonprofit environments. He currently works for Acumen Solutions, a consulting firm that specializes in salesforce project implementations. Harry's presentation is the answer to the question, "What happens when we, as PMs, need to get our executives to focus even on such obvious things as schedule and scope? Harry's got steps for us.

I really like the implicit hook that we're trying to get executives to take action, that might be one of the reasons we need to be doing this, but what made you want to frame this to be a speech for you?

HZ: Yeah, it's funny is that I'm actually very lousy and speaking truth to power. So that was actually a motivation, to try to improve, just for my own edification, and understand just what are the dynamics. Because in the past, I've had some experiences, mostly negative, with senior management that I was trying to convey some bad news and really got smacked around for it. So I was thinking, What might be a better way to do it? What are some of the methods, what do some of the experts say about the best way to speak truth to power?

KL (44:40): You talk about five practical steps to doing this and understanding the concept as it's applied to PMS, and I want to push in on that. So, where did you source your steps?

ZH: You know, what's interesting is I've been looking at the history of speaking truth to power, and

I came upon this gentleman, Doug Elmendorf, who...this is going back to 2011 now, and he was the Director of the Congressional Budget Office, which is supposed to be non-partisan, and has been non-partisan. And there was an NPR snippet that I was listening to, and he basically, in a very bold way, basically told the Congressional Budget Office that they were on the wrong path. It was a very brave and bold move. So what's interesting is that the person who was listening to that Congressional Budget Office hearing was a gentleman by the name of Scott Eblin.

HZ (45:42): Mr. Eblin wrote a blog soon after that testimony, and he basically came up with a five-step plan for speaking truth to power. And so I thought it was helpful as something that's very pragmatic, some steps you can take right away. And that is: Knowing your facts; Stating your case; Standing your ground; Keeping your cool; and offer options.

So the first one is knowing your facts. So what we say here is, be prepared. Have your data, your facts, your sources verified. You know, no suppositions or conjectures. Just make sure you're prepared, you're armed with the facts. Become the expert on what you're stating or proposing. And you really need to earn your credibility to say what has to be said.

The second recommendation is State your case. And actually, it's very similar to how do would, as a lawyer, present your case to a jury. Just be very clear, concise, to the point. Be polite, courteous, respectful. Tell a good story, that's another thing that's helpful. Present your case in such a way that it's going to be interesting. Also, another thing is being honest, instead of dismissing any bad facts that you might have presented previously. So you want to do that damage control, if you've ever presented any bad facts, before you present your case now.

The next is Stand your ground. Being respectful to somebody that you're presenting this to, but make sure it's fact-based. So, building resiliency is really key. Don't let somebody push you around. There's a psychologist, her name is Linda Graham, and describes something called Response Flexibility, which is the ability to pause, step back, reflect and shift perspectives. So it's sort of like taking a moment to breathe almost. And don't get pushed around, But do it in a respectful way.

KL (48:08): You talked about response flexibility and stand your ground. But actually the discussion in there was really interesting to me, and I invite people to listen to it, because it was about being able, if a power-holder shifts the discussion, for example, if they go to overly reductive or overly generalized in order to make a point, it's about taking that pause and shifting a perspective; being able to essentially adapt your own response as a function of standing your ground. It's kind of like you don't... You stand your ground, but you turn, right? You're flexible around that spot.

HZ: Yeah, it is tough to do, especially if you've got somebody with a strong personality, somebody who can be overbearing in their ways of dealing with people. But to be effective and to address whatever the issue is with those that have the power, standing your ground will hopefully be acceptable, not only acceptable, but respected.

See, that's the other thing is, there has to be a mutual respect here. If you don't have mutual respect, then it's really a... I wouldn't say a lost cause, but it's pretty difficult to do. If the person that has the power is not respectful, then it's much more difficult to stay in your ground.

HZ (49:34): And then, Keeping your cool, which I find personally sometimes difficult to do, under

stress and pressure. But the whole idea is, just think carefully before you speak. You know, be the voice of reason. Take a deep breath, remain calm. Avoid falling victim to your triggers. So I have triggers, there are certain things people say or do, that sets me off. So just be aware of those triggers and don't let that make you lose your cool.

The other part is offering your options to that person. So you don't want to back somebody in a corner so that they're put into a defensive posture. So you want to be able to offer some viable options that square up with the facts. That's the important thing, it's not just state there's a problem, but also say, "Here's what we can do to rectify the issue, to resolve the issue." Here's the mitigation.

KL (50:38): Well that's "The Art of War," by Sun Tzu, right? Give everybody a way out. But in this case, it's not really an argument. This is about speaking truth to power. This is when I know or I believe I know something important that doesn't make the other person feel good, and they have power. It will be, however is important to them, challenge them in a way that makes them not feel good. So having a way out... I clearly see that in recommendations, right? Kind of like analysis of alternatives, let's have some alternatives. But I've also found it important in the sense of alternative explanations. So this data could also mean this other thing. So, you know, I'm recognizing that that could be true. I can explain why I think it's not. But, you know that willingness...

HZ: Yeah, so going back to knowing your facts, is building a solid reputation. And by building that solid reputation, you also look at the 360 view. It's not just one aspect, but looking at all aspects. It's looking at beyond myself. This is really what the truth is. I think it was a professor from China that was on the call, on the Q and A, and he pointblank ased about truth.

Questioner (52:00): So sometimes you think it is the truth, but you could not have 100% confidence. Even sometimes your 2% not true, turns out not to be true, or perfect later. How do you deal with that situation when you have to kind of retrace yourself I guess?

HZ: So I think it's being honest when you're doing this, and saying, I really don't know 100% that this is true, but here's what I know. And present the facts, and defend those facts, just like you were lawyer. So I think that honesty is really, it's a part of having integrity as a Project Manager. It's that code of ethics that we commit to as project managers.

KL (52:48): We have to recognize as PMs, that some of our truth that we know, that we think we know…our interpretations of information we have, actually unfold over time. It's not that I've misstated, misled or don't know. I know what I can know now, but as the project continues, more unfolds. More things are known in the fullness of time. And so when we are making decisions, or when we are having to get others to make decisions, or, let's make it, or when we're having to get others to make decisions who may not want to hear what we're saying – i.e. truth to power – it's so much more imperative to me, that we think about how things may unfold over time.

HZ: Yes. You know, that's the beauty of taking an agile approach, is that you iteratively uncover the truth, so to speak, in the terms of requirements, in terms of things that you discover along the way that wasn't true when you first started. So it's progressively elaborating on something that you initially didn't know, or you had an assumption, but by prototyping and doing things like that, you uncover some things you didn't know before.

KL: The reason I brought it up is, Step One is Know your facts, and the real reality there may be

that we don't know the facts. We recognize that we are interpreting, and that some of the facts we recognize will uncover themselves over time. So that could help us hedge and help us stand our ground in a more flexible way, is what I was feeling.

KL (54:32): In your presentation, you get down to where and why it matters, the impact of project managers on effectively speaking truth to power.

HZ: So, just quickly, this slide is, "Whats the impact to project managers of effectively speaking truth to power?" So these are some of the benefits of doing that. There's less time wasted for implementation. It could prevent possible scope creep; timely decisions from executives.

KL: This has direct impact on schedule and scope; the sufficient time question; an additional requirements question… This is right to our iron triangle, right? If you can't speak to that, you may have a problem. And if you can't be compelling, you may even have a problem. But if you can't even raise it, there's an issue.

And the third one, getting them to make decisions, that's just a classic stakeholder management problem, right? In the salience model, of who has the right to make changes to your world.

HZ: That's right, it's part of stakeholder management, definitely. You know, how do you manage these kinds of situations where there is an imbalance? We talk about the balance of power between the resource manager and the project manager, depending on the types of organizations. If it's projectized, versus…you know, whether it's a functional organization or a matrix organization.

But even through all of that is really, how do you talk to your project sponsors and those that have a lot of this authority to make decisions that have a tremendous amount of impact on your project?

KL: We talk about communication is so important, this is about challenging and doing it properly and effectively, recognizing the limitations that we have on thinking about how others are thinking, and limitations on what we might or might not know. And I think, to me, what I took away was a call to action, was also taking a moment, it's not so much speaking truth to power, of making sure that you understand the politics of the environment you're in, which politics I translate as "power." The power dynamics of the environment you're in. Finding where that is, and knowing where you sit in that and what matters to help people understand decisions they need to make is so important.

HZ: Kendall, you may have created a six-step plan now, with the sixth being, Know your environment.

KL: Because you have team members, even if they are more subject matter experts, or elite in their field than you are, you have this role of understanding where work is assigned, how work is assigned, and what constitutes acceptable work and quality, as well as resourcing. So when we talk about power, right? This is validating people's competence as well as their use of time or conceivably even money – compensation in some form.

HZ: Yeah. You know, in the world of PMI, the project managers are kind of like the center of the universe. But in reality, the world of project management really depends on the type of situation, or, like you said, structure, where the project manager could have more or less power, depending on how the organization is structured. And in the case where we don't have as much power, it can be a

struggle.

KL (57:56): As PMs, you may be leaders of your teams. But no matter what type of organization you're working in, chances are, you are situated somewhere in the middle. Harry offers a fairly simple process for communicating your perspective and concerns to the people above you who need to know. It may be difficult to muster the courage to present your views, but remember, especially in a volatile economy, it is essential that your boss be aware of a problematic or potentially problematic situation. Just remember the five steps, including offering alternative solutions. And of course, don't delay. You can find Harry on LinkedIn. He's the Harry Zolkower that has an MPA, PMP and CSM with his name.

KL: As usual, the magic seems to boil down to communication. The purpose of effective communication in a VUCA environment is to keep the organization honest, it seems, with what the executives want, with the ability of the team. One thing we learned here is that all success is unique. It's about finding the right fit based on accurate, honest understanding of the context and situation, and the specific goals of the project.

Special thanks to my guests, Steven Gruyters, Al Zeitoun and Harry Zolkower.

Announcer: Our theme music was composed by Molly Flannery, used with permission. Additional original music by Gary Fieldman, Rich Greenblatt, Lionel Lyles, and Hiroaki Honshuku. Post-production performed at M Powered Strategies.

KL: PMPs who have listened through this complete podcast may submit a PDU claim, one PDU, in the talent triangle, "Leadership," with the Project Management Institute's CCR system. Use provider code 4634 and the title "PMPOV0081 Project Teams in a VUCA Context from the 2020 UMD Symposium." You can also use the PDU claim code 4634YQTYGS. Tune into our next episode, where we will have Part 2 of our "View from the C-Suite," where executives will talk about what they need and what they expect from project managers.

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