



## Superior Team Performance

*This paper discusses a proven approach to ensure projects are completed within the terms of their approval regarding user expectations, scope, funding and time constraints.*

*If you want to consistently complete all your projects on-time and on budget, and exceed expectations for results, follow the four principles for **Superior Team Performance**. To achieve such results, a new approach in the way you plan, organize, and execute your projects is a necessary condition for success. These principles are consistent with the application of Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People<sup>1</sup>.*

### Introduction

Securing top performance from teams that have never worked together is one of the greatest challenges facing organizations with today's projects, given reasons such as:

- High turnover caused by organizational realignments has made it all but impossible or unlikely that individuals that work successfully in one project will be together in another one, building on past experiences;
- Teams tend to bring varying degrees of knowledge, expertise, methods and practices, and experience, creating a kaleidoscope of opinions as to the best approaches to be followed to achieve consistent results;
- The constant dislocations of employment structures of recent years, compounded by the destruction of career paths, have created a situation in which the loyalties of knowledge workers have all but disappeared, giving rise to a self-centered, survival-driven, and individualistic approaches to work, limiting ownership for the project results;
- Given the era of globalization, most of today's large projects require the use of "virtual teams", working from various geographical locations and time zones, limiting the creation of teaming relationships ; and
- Constant technological change and employee turnover have prevented IT organizations moving past the first level of the capability maturity model<sup>ii</sup> ("CMM") in which they can start attaining repeatable and predictable results.

As such, no amount of traditional project management practices or PM certification will necessarily facilitate the establishment of high-performance teams from the get go. The application of project management practices outlined in PMI's Book of Knowledge<sup>iii</sup> significantly reduces risks to complete any project, yet they will not guarantee success. It is about management and not project management certification.

This paper is not about introducing new management practices – It is about improving **Team Communications** by changing the way project related work activities are planned, organized and executed to achieve superior results; it is also about **Project Leadership** and how to achieve superior team performance.

Based on three decades in the IT sector, dealing with knowledge workers and observing why so few projects succeed, I found that to consistently deliver projects on time and on budget, the strict and uncompromising application of the following four team **Performance Realization Principles**<sup>®</sup> is the key to success.

- *Outcome Realization*
- *Knowledge Realization*
- *Verification Realization*
- *Communications Realization*

Each time I had the opportunity to apply these principles, and was not subjected to unwarranted interference by the higher lords of wisdom, "dictating" how to do things by virtue of their hierarchical pecking order, or politically motivated imperatives, success was never in question in my mind – it was an inevitable outcome.

### Audience

This paper is written for those who are particularly concerned with securing top performance results from their team members to consistently deliver successful projects. It also provides the rationale behind the importance of adopting a proven method of tracking projects performance using "gate-management."

This paper complements a discussion on "Superior Team Performance & Organizational Behaviour Considerations."



## How to Achieve STP

Superior Team Performance is, in my experience, surprisingly simple to attain, if the following four principles are systematically applied in unison throughout the life of the project or program.

### Outcome Realization

***If you cannot agree on what the end looks like, you will never know when you are done!***

If the team cannot visualize and commit to what the end looks like for a program or project outcome, it will never be achieved as expected.

In the early eighties, the IT consulting services organization I was employed with could not deliver most projects with any degree of success (measured by customer satisfaction and profitability), despite their interest in applying sound SDLC methodologies and project management practices. Time and time again customers were dissatisfied, hardly anything was delivered on time, and most projects were well over budget. At the bottom of it, there was one major flaw in everything the company did – they never defined at the outset the rules of final outcome (“disengagement”), the point at which a project could be deemed to be satisfactorily complete. All efforts were focused in selling, sign contracts, and begin realizing revenues, but did not spend one minute defining the “contract-out” rules – that is until it was too late. Much worse, the teams lacked a “Shared Vision” of what the final outcome looked like, since the salesperson that made the promises was already disengaged in order to chase his/her next quarter’s quota.

The reality on most projects is that end-user expectations are constantly changing. When they commit to a project, they make a number of assumptions, many of which are not documented. As the project evolves, their expectations evolve, change and are redefined in their minds altering the basis by which they will determine whether a project was successful or not – unless you establish a process to control the final outcome.

Do yourself a big favour; always plan your projects **“beginning with the end in mind”** - as Stephen Covey suggests in habit #2<sup>iii</sup>. The first document you should always produce (before the project charter) is the Conditions of Project Acceptance or Acceptance Criteria – I usually label it my “contract out rules.”

No matter how experienced you are and how many times you have done a project of a certain type, each project is a unique undertaking and involves a degree of uncertainty and risk. Each project has

to address the expectations of many people (users and team members) that are constantly changing as the project evolves. I use the analogy of exploring a cave in the mountains – the two basic tools you need are a lamp and an unbreakable cord. The lamp is your guide in, and the cord is your way out if you lose your lamp; so is the project acceptance criterion. If you cannot agree on the conditions for acceptance up-front, would you still undertake the project?

By establishing a shared vision and goals with your team of what the end looks like, and agreeing to the conditions of acceptance before you spend a minute on your project, you cannot miss securing the “Outcome Realization”. Be practical, the shared vision is about meeting all stated end-user expectations (not yours or the team’s) and secure a satisfactory release of your project obligations.

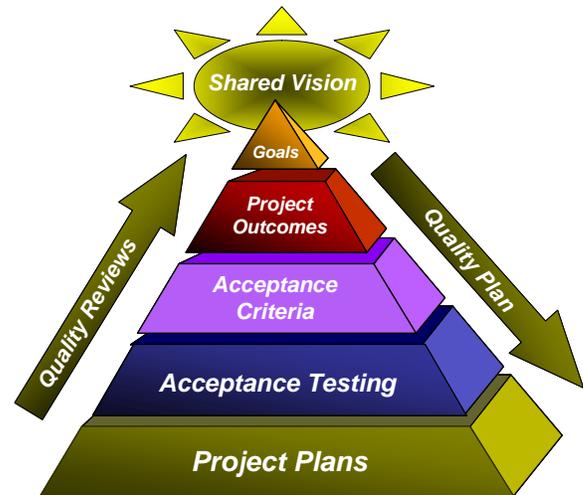


Figure 1 – Managing with the Project Outcome in Mind

Always work from the end-result backwards and decompose the acceptance criteria into discrete and measurable control milestones (“**Stages**”) to track the project deliverables compliance with it. Then for all work activities within a stage, identify hand-off quality control points (“**Gates**” that define quality plans and conditions of acceptance), to ensure that each building block of your project contributes to meeting the stated acceptance criteria. Most importantly, the contents of this document must be shared, internalized and believed by the team.

### Knowledge Realization

***If you cannot explain it, You cannot do it!***

Having decomposed the project into discrete work elements (activities & tasks), each activity’s outcome thereof must be understood and agreed by the entire team before work commences.



When a team is assembled to deliver a project, assuming that their members were selected with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to do the job, project managers usually make a fatal assumption – that they will be able to work like a well oiled machine from the start – **WRONG!**

We always assume that each team member understands what needs to be done to execute a given task, and how. Yet, more often than not, they are not able to explain in convincing detail how they plan to go from A to B, and to ensure that everyone understands it and go along for the ride. The analogy here is going on an expedition through the dessert for the first time – if your guide cannot explain everything about the trip, the route, risks and what to do about them, would you trust the guide?

One of the most troublesome traits I have observed in the IT sector is lack of listening and communication skills. No sooner than a user begins to explain their needs, the minds of the analyst or programmer are already on the keyboard and have decided how to approach the problem based on their past experience or context-reference.

There is also a human tendency, innate in all of us, to always gravitate to what is comfortable, based on our past knowledge and experience – people tend to behave like water, always seeping through the cracks. Usually, each team member will always try to influence everyone else on how the project needs to evolve and, frequently, impose their wisdom and experiences on the rest of the team.

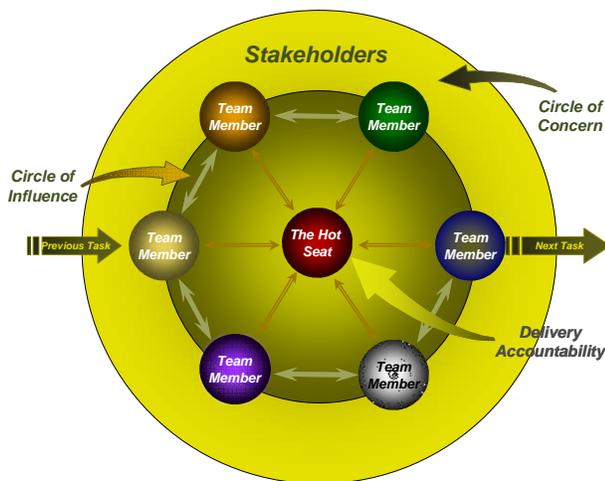


Figure 2 – Knowledge Realization

The knowledge realization principle can only be achieved prior to the execution of each task about to be undertaken.

As project manager/leader, your duty is to ensure that each team member accountable for executing each task ("The Hot Seat"):

- studies and understands the information required to execute it (inputs) and defines what they will produce (outcomes);
- explains to the team members, directly and indirectly impacted by their work, in minute detail, how the outcomes of the activity will be achieved and verified; and
- produces a "Quality Review" plan.

The goal here is **"seeking first to understand and then to be understood"** (Stephen Covey's *Habit 5<sup>iii</sup>*).

Therefore, before you authorize the start of any task, those with delivery accountability must make a convincing presentation - to the team members and stakeholders that are indirectly or directly impacted - about the understanding of what needs to be done and how, and seek input from all members of the team impacted by the work to be done.

Since every project is usually a unique endeavour, a key consideration in this approach is that most of us will never bring complete knowledge or have the necessary experience to tackle any problem that comes our way. We must encourage team members to disclose their weaknesses, as we recognize their strengths. When a team member realizes that he/she does not have a necessary experience or skill, the team must supply the support and knowledge necessary to do the job right, and define the task's conditions for success. This way, you will ensure that the work will be done right the first time, every time. Do not find this out down the road, as this is one of the primary causes of project failure.

### Verification Realization

***If you cannot demonstrate it,  
You have not done it!***

If you are at the receiving end of an activity your work depends on, it would be quite unfair to reject or critique the output if the conditions for successful delivery of a task were not specified before it was undertaken. But if all stakeholders directly and indirectly impacted have participated in the formulation of the Quality Review Plan for the activity whose deliverable you depend to do your work, would you accept the outcomes just produced without verifying that it was done correctly? - Probably not.

That is why in Figure 3 the individual accountable for executing the next task must agree to the conditions for quality and acceptance of a task's outcome.



## New Millennium Team Thinking\* - White Paper Superior Team Performance

Quality plans are prepared for each control point (or Gate) which defines the conditions of acceptance of the gate. At the completion of each gate, (or hand-off), a quality review is conducted to verify that the work was completed in accordance with the team expectations.

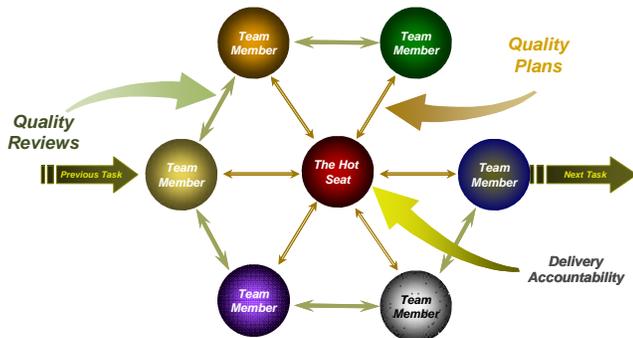


Figure 3 – Verification Realization

If this process is applied to each activity in your plan, all team member activities take the form of a continuum of relationship building and agreements each step of the way leading to **"thinking in terms of win-win outcomes"** (Covey's Habit 4) – one of the critical ingredients for achieving trust and integrity. This approach also supports my fundamental principle for quality management – **"do the right things right, the first time, every time"**

In several projects, where these two principles were applied, this process was criticized as too expensive. Yet, I have proven that this approach leads to little or no re-work. In the understanding that most projects do not have enough time to do the work, why is this approach objectionable if they do not have enough time to correct mistakes?

### Communications Realization

***If the team does not communicate effectively – superior team synergism will not happen!***

A shared vision is the basic building block for good communications. Next is sharing information and knowledge to learn from one another. This is represented by the arrows in Figure 2. It takes empathetic communications and team interaction to fuel action and connection amongst team members and the project stakeholders.

Achieving superior team performance is about effective communications and empowerment of team members. Good communications (even in the face of adversity) improves morale, trust and integrity. This principle is particularly critical when dealing with virtual team environments. Effective teams have teammates that are constantly talking to one another, verbal or written.

Communication matters. When team members do not share information on a timely basis, or communicate succinctly and effectively, can lead to loss of trust and integrity of the project's outcomes – Doers & thinkers are inevitably punished, the lazy are rewarded, and every decision made is arbitrary and without foundation.

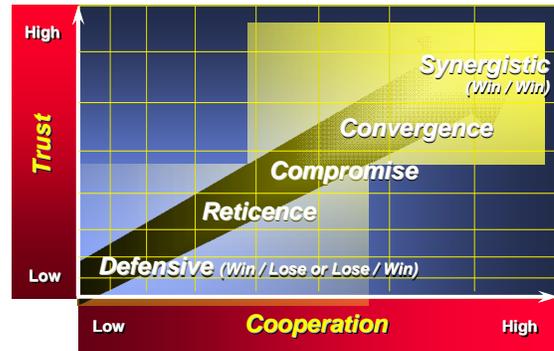


Figure 4 Levels of Communication

Effective team communications builds trust and cooperation. It moves a team from defensiveness and protectiveness (not everyone wins) to team synergism (everybody wins).

The second and third principles discussed above are about building trust and cooperation. I have seen teams where teammates seldom let one another know what is going on (need to know syndrome). The team gets stuck since no one knows who is doing what, what is the current project agenda and important tasks remain uncompleted because they assume that another team member is taking care of it. Work is duplicated or is counter-productive, and surely, begins to impact the stakeholders through organizational fights believing that they are being sabotaged by one another.

Another phenomenon I have witnessed is poorly structured project documentation archives, without appropriate standards and revision controls. Also, key information is kept mostly on workstations or laptops and not in the servers where it can be shared. Effective communications involve:

- 1) *Communication directive* – that states "Information must be horizontally and vertically shared across the team, unless it is unethical, illegal, or can harm the interests of others"
- 2) *Documentation management* – the setting of standards, archiving, versioning, and change controls to ensure that team members have access to the latest information.
- 3) *Communication practices* – appropriate rules for effective listening and communications via e-mail, meetings, phone messaging, etc.



### Team Synergism

***If leadership is not present – superior team performance will never happen!***

This is not stated as a principle since team synergism cannot be dictated, measured or quantified – it is either evident or not. It is triggered through leadership, and emerges on its own when the appropriate environment and creative cooperation is provided and maintained - *Stephen Covey's Habit 6<sup>i</sup>*.

In my 30 years' experience, when I applied the above four principles, combined with applying the networked-thinking attributes, something unique always emerged – **Team Synergism**. Synergism is exciting, as it fosters creativity, openness, fluid communications, team learning and shared success.

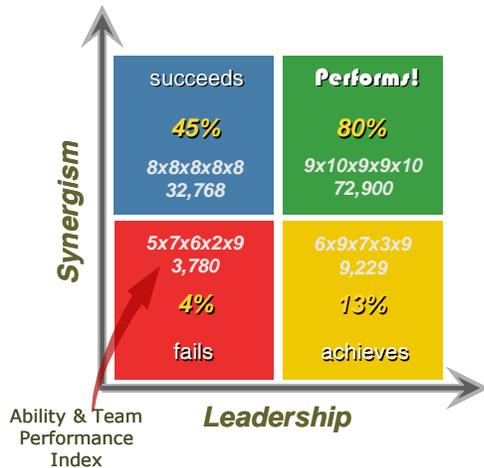


Figure 5 – Superior Team Performance

You can determine the team performance index by determining the level of knowledge and understanding of each individual with respect to the work objective. This Ability Performance Index, when multiplied with the rest of the team determines the Team Performance Index. Leadership marginally increases performance whereas synergism equalizes knowledge and understanding<sup>iv</sup>.

Team synergism requires leadership, and happens when the combined energies and talents of the team produce a more positive effect than any one person could achieve. The effect is reflected superior individual performance, as no effort or time is wasted. Each step is like a solid piece of stone that has a meaningful purpose that supports the cathedral of their shared vision and goals, and realized by sharing their knowledge and experience.

Team synergism works as a multiplier effect of the individual contributions. A team of four performing at its best ( $10^4 = 10,000$ ) will contrast one when an individual is not ( $10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 5 = 5,000$ ). In this example it takes only one member not pulling its weight to cause a 50% reduction in performance.

A project team that starts with a "Shared Vision" – with the same understanding of the mission, their project's particular purpose and appreciation for the individual strengths and contributions of team members - communicates and performs more effectively, yields better results, and imparts an enduring legacy of experience and skill to the organization.

Twenty years ago, I was asked to recover a project that did not have a chance to succeed – it was late and well over budget. It gave me the opportunity to work with a team that many considered misfits – no other project wanted them. No one was trained or had the knowledge or experience to execute the work as it was expected of them. Every team member was convinced that the project would fail and acted defensively protecting their "interests." Yet, it became clear that each of them had one common characteristic – the will to succeed. What was needed is to redefine the work as to offset knowledge and experience deficiencies, apply new work disciplines, instill confidence in their abilities, and implement audit and quality verification methods to ensure the work was done right the first time, every time. When errors were made the team rose to fix them collectively and no one was penalized –only hiding them was. The results were amazing – productivity went through the roof, well beyond industry standards and the team managed to resolve huge knowledge obstacles and adversities on their own – Superior Team Performance and Synergism was achieved.

### Virtual Collaboration Environments

Today's technological advances have made it possible to use the Internet as a medium to facilitate team collaboration across many countries and time zones. Yet no amount of technology would make them effective unless the way in which they interact and perform is facilitated (not managed) using the foregoing principles.

These "virtual teams" can be as effective as those working next to each other – except for one important ingredient – The team that plays together succeeds together. So in order to achieve complete synergism, a team needs to build close interpersonal relationships to facilitate open communications that, often, cannot be facilitated via technology alone.



When it is not feasible to bring an entire team together, the one fundamental condition is that the virtual team must be organized into localized delivery teams, each fully accountable for completing a project outcome. Since the completion of each stage is measured by the gates assigned and finished, it is very easy to determine the status of the project, even if the project manager is not very close to them.



Figure 6 – The Virtual Environment

Gate Management is an ideal method for tracking project status when you require the use of virtual teams.

## Tracking Project Performance

Conventional project management tools are not very effective in tracking where the project is at, unless the project manager is prepared to spend a significant amount of time feeding information tools such as MsProject. If you want to produce exacting information about the project status with minimal effort and time, use the “Gate Status Management” method described below.

### Traditional Methods

Traditionally, project managers have employed one of the following three methods to report on the status of the project’s completion:

- Gut feel - an account by the team members as to where the project is;
- Effort spent – by tracking the effort spent against the plan adjusted with effort to complete; and/or
- Earned value – by tracking the costs against the budget.

It is surprising to see the frequency of usage of the most ineffective method in assessing project status - “gut feel”. How often have you seen a situation of achieving the 90% complete, just to find out that the last 10% is likely to take forever to realize? I recently witness a situation where a project claimed that they had achieved a 75% completion woke-up to the realization that the project was no more than 10% complete - further analysis indicated that the 10% was also a write off. Big money and time was wasted.

Recently, a lot of project management discussion has been around quantitative value earned measurements. Yet, I am not convinced that such processes can provide an accurate measurement of where a project is at any one time. Based on a methodology I developed 20 years ago to manage a very large system development project, the “gate management” concept evolved to provide an accurate measure of project status.

## Gate Status Management

Business strategy leads to business transformation initiatives, which in turn leads to the creation of Programs to execute the strategy. Programs are usually multi-project initiatives, whereas projects with the implementation of specific changes in infrastructure systems needed to support the new business processes.

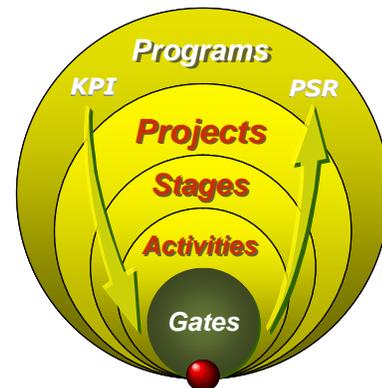


Figure 7 – Projects Decomposition Hierarchy

Gates are defined as “**moments of truth**” that have two important characteristics: a measurement can be obtained to determine that an activity’s outcome has completed a task based on pre-defined criteria (Quality Plan); and there is a quality review before the “hand-off” to another team member or group as an input to the next gate.

In Gate Status Management, projects are usually broken into stages, which correspond to the major “project milestones” defined to determine the progress made. These milestones must be driven by business need not by methodology imperatives, such as the use of the traditional SDLC project phases (e.g. Define, Design, Build, etc.) A Stage determines whether a business objective (or milestone) has been met, and formal acceptance criteria has been documented and verified. Each stage has an “earned value” that determines the percent complete of the project relative to others – and is not based on effort or money spent.

Each Stage is then broken into activities that describe the outcomes to be produced in the stage (not tasks). To measure the progress of each activity, a number of gates (3-12) are identified



that are closely aligned with the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), each bearing a relative weight to that of the other gates. The confirmation that a gate was completed is then used in determining the percent completion. Performance Status Reports are derived from the progress recorded at each gate.

Gate status management is intertwined with the second and third principles enunciated above and works as follows:

- 1) When a gate is assigned to a team member (or group), having demonstrated the second principle as explained above (Knowledge Realization), 50% of the relative value of the gate is assigned, irrespective of effort, dollars and time required to execute it.
- 2) The team remains at 50% on a gate as long as it needs to do the task and, when the third principle (Outcome Realization) is satisfied, the other 50% is assigned.
- 3) The percent complete for each phase is derived by aggregating the value-earned for the gates that have been started and completed.

The results provided by this method are more precise (directly proportional to the number of activities and gates), and provide the true measure of where the project is, as you are measuring completed quality work – not effort and dollars spent. Conventional methods, such as effort spent to budget, do not reflect the true situation since they do not incorporate knowledge and quality management to demonstrate that the project is evolving as anticipated.

## Conclusions

The significant challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization and the information economy, coupled with the introduction of internet-based e-commerce/business, also brought about an era of de-stabilization of organizational and power-control structures and business processes.

The need to re-align resources and processes to adapt to new market conditions also brought about a new generation of techniques, such as process re-engineering and major business transformation initiatives.

This constant has created a situation which prevents leveraging the experience of teams to work on new projects. More often than not, each new project involves new people, bringing different habits and levels of knowledge and experience. Now days, multi-disciplinary teams are the norm rather than the exception. This requires new approaches to achieve team performance.

Achieving superior team performance is about effective leadership and communications, through expectations management, out-of-the-box thinking, and team skills development.

There is a great deal of talk these days about teams and team work. Most of it starts out with the wrong assumption, namely, that we have never before worked in teams. Actually, for hundreds of years people have always worked in teams and very few people ever could work effectively by themselves. The individual is a cost center not a performance center - it is the organization that performs!!

So the root cause of project failures is often traced to inadequate organizational, management, communications and working practices, not the individual knowledge worker. As Peter Drucker put it in 1996<sup>v</sup> – “The knowledge society will inevitable become far more competitive than any society we have yet known for the simple reason that with knowledge being universally accessible, there are no excuses for non-performance; there will be no poor countries – only ignorant countries” - The same argument can be extended to all organizations that involve the intervention of knowledge workers.

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**PRSL's Perform™** Program & Project Management Methods provide an array of tools (from basic to advanced) that allow a project manager to track a project or program status with minimal effort.

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## References

- <sup>i</sup> *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* - Stephen R. Covey – Simon & Schuster 1989
- <sup>ii</sup> Carnegie Mellon University – Software Engineering Institute - <http://www.sei.cmu.edu/cmmi/products/models.html>
- <sup>iii</sup> Project Management Institute - Book of Knowledge (<http://www.pmi.org>)
- <sup>iv</sup> See White Paper on deriving the Team Performance Index [http://www.prsi.ca/pdf/PPMWPTPI\\_V4.pdf](http://www.prsi.ca/pdf/PPMWPTPI_V4.pdf)
- <sup>v</sup> Knowledge Work and Knowledge Society – P. Drucker [http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/factory/ksgpress/www/ksg\\_news/transcripts/drucklec.htm](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/factory/ksgpress/www/ksg_news/transcripts/drucklec.htm)