

THE SEWA PROJECT MANAGEMENT MODEL



DR. RASHID ALLEEM

The Knowledge Ambassador of the UAE

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SEWA Project Management Model



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**“I have seen “mega”
projects succeed against
all the odds and I have
seen “smaller-scale”
projects fail regardless of
methodology or tools.
I have separated these
experiences and I came
to the conclusion that the
critical success factor was
not the methodology or
the tools, but rather the
RIGHT People.”**

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

*For my beloved daughters Eman, Reem, and Hind.
May God continue to bless them with peace and grace.*

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The SEWA Way
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THE SEWA PROJECT
MANAGEMENT
MODEL

FOREWORD

His Excellency Dr. Rashid Alleem understands how to breathe life into organizations. He does that by challenging the status quo and by inspiring those around him. Change is never easy. Most people fear it. However, His Excellency knows that an organization that will adapt is one that will thrive.

Prior to his arrival, Sharjah Electricity and Water Authority, or SEWA, was in disrepair. His Excellency recognized that the only way to reverse the negative trend at SEWA was to alter the institutional culture. The financial losses, low morale, and lack of customer trust occurred because the old system prevented anyone from becoming a stakeholder in the organization's success. In order to reverse the course and meet the challenge assigned by His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, His Excellency needed to change SEWA's routine.

Change can be risky. Those that propose change are often questioned. Internally, doubt is common amongst the people that we try to lead. Externally, critics will focus on anything negative to undermine a leader's efforts to pioneer new practices. But a true leader must have the courage to risk failure.

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is the willingness to persevere despite being afraid. A leader has not demonstrated courage until they have accepted risk. This is the difference between an actual leader and a career administrator.

Another sign of leadership is strength. But that doesn't mean that a leader must bear the weight of an organization on their own back. The most effective leaders are ones that leverage the capabilities of their own people. When barriers are eliminated and collaboration

is embraced, ideas flourish. His Excellency recognized this. He recruited new talent to integrate with legacy workers. He broke down horizontal departments and vertical command barriers. He created a safe environment to share inventive thoughts. This not only enhances communication, but it also enables all employees to feel vested as contributors to the improvements in the organization.

Like His Excellency, my approach to funding infrastructure is to proactively embrace innovation. When I first arrived at Johnson Controls, the JCI Structured Finance business was stationary. It had a traditional way to do business and lacked innovation. It passively waited to follow the market and struggled to keep pace. We changed all of that.

Now it's part of our mission to be creative. We think less about the financial services that Johnson Controls wants to supply and more about what our customers demand. We seek to understand our customers. To use a medical phrase, we prefer to diagnose the ailment before we prescribe the medicine. At the same time, we collaborate both internally and externally. This communication has inspired innovation. His Excellency shares the same philosophy. Readers of *The SEWA project management model* will learn from His Excellency's management approach and can hopefully implement a similar style in their own organizations.

Ben Speed
Global Executive Director
Structured Finance
Johnson Controls International, USA

INTRODUCTION

SURVIVE AND THRIVE

“Only those leaders who act boldly in times of crisis and change are willingly followed.”

—Jim Kouzes

Making Things Happen

My favorite word in the English language is ‘how.’ How does this work? How was this made? How did they do this? Whenever I see something interesting happen, I’m filled with insightful questions that involve this small but powerful little word. I have this incurable desire to pick the brains of people I meet. Most of the answers I find center on how people apply their own intelligence and wisdom rather than their knowledge of specific technologies or theories. After 15 years of building/creating things and comparing my experiences to those of others in the field of project management, I’ve learned how to manage projects well. This book is a summation of those ideas.

It includes approaches for leading teams, working with ideas, organizing projects, managing schedules, dealing with politics, and making things happen—even in the face of great challenges and unfair situations.

Unlike some other books on how to lead projects, this book doesn’t ascribe to any grand theory or presumptively philosophy. Instead, I’ve

placed my bet on innovation, practicality, and diversity. In fact, project management skills are not so *esoteric* that only geniuses can master them. All of us can learn them and excel at project management, and that is what this book is about. Projects result in good things when the right combination of people, skills, attitudes, and tactics is applied, regardless of their origin or (lack of) pedigree. I've wagered heavily on picking the right topics and giving good advice over all other considerations. I hope you find that I've made the right choice!

This inspiring and practical guidebook is based on my own personal leadership principles I lived and practiced at SEWA, but you won't find these principles in any official SEWA guide to leadership success. These principles can, hopefully, help you find your own authentic voice, success, and fulfillment. This is important and the soul of this book.

This book contains a treasury of lessons and techniques that will benefit project teams of any experience level. The lessons in this book are easy to read, understand, and apply—and they will help you not only survive but also thrive in today's project management world. It can also help you avoid the kinds of mistakes that will derail you.

Surely, the above may have caught your attention and kept you reading until this point. Now, let me take you to a flashback. Rewind your clock to the spring of 2014, when I zigged and zagged my way to success.

In the first few pages, I'll explain what the whole book is about.

Turn the page to find out more.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Your aim should be to make *The SEWA Project Management Model* a part of your daily projects (big or small). I urge you to read this book slowly and then reread it. Dog-ear the pages that you might want to revisit or find interesting.

Take it all in. Throughout the text, I have provided famous quotes where I invite you to pause, review, and contemplate. However, you don't necessarily have to pause after each quote. Just get a global sense of the entire story we are telling.

I urge you to give *The SEWA Project Management Model* a test drive and make it your own. Work toward letting the model become second nature. I encourage you to revisit chapters again and again—different elements will resonate with you at different times. The more you absorb and practice these elements of *The SEWA Project Management Model*, the more you will get out of them.

The SEWA Project Management Model is unique in that it isn't about outdated theories or philosophical ideas. Instead, it is simply packed with tips, powerful stories, and motivational quotes that I've gathered and used in my personal and professional life. They have made a huge difference for me, and they can do the same for you and your team in a sustainable way.

And yes, once you've mastered the model, feel free to pass this book on to someone you know who needs it or donate it to the local library. As Homer said, "The charity that seems trifle to us may seem precious to others."

Enjoy!

A THOROUGH TURNAROUND

AGAINST THE CLOCK

*“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time
plays many parts, His acts being seven ages.”*

—William Shakespeare

A Serious Problem

APRIL 22, 2014: It would be a day like no other in Sharjah’s history. Unsurprisingly, more than 1.5 million of Sharjah’s residents were soon asking the obvious questions: Who is this Rashid Alleem? Why him? And where on earth did he come from?

No, you haven’t picked up the wrong book mistakenly; this isn’t a book about my career or my personal achievements. It’s neither an autobiography nor a biography. It’s about business, specifically the way organizations can learn faster and become more agile and competitive when the customer is the focal point. The book contains a great deal of useful lessons from my many successes and a few failures and how to handle them. And boy, did I learn from my mistakes—over and over again.

The Turning Point

Monday, April 21, 2014, was a historical and momentous day in my life. It was 3 p.m., and I was in the middle of a late lunch with my

beloved family when I received a call from the executive office of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi, a member of the Supreme Council of the United Arab Emirates and the President of Sharjah, stating that His Highness had chosen me, exclusively, to chair the Sharjah Electricity and Water Authority (SEWA). SEWA provides electricity, water, and gas to the entire city of Sharjah. His Highness's decision was based on his displeasure with the previous management's performance, both financially and administratively. Furthermore, His Highness believed I could make things like no one else. The call was a huge surprise! I could not believe my own ears and was speechless for a moment. I could not even enjoy the rest of my lunch.

To put it bluntly, the position would mean more responsibility and a new challenge, but I wondered if it was right for me. It introduced a degree of uncertainty that required a different kind of leadership. As His Highness believes, "Till the last man in the last village is happy, the work of the government is not done."

A Decision Based on Intuition

I was asked if I would accept this daunting task. It was not a good time for me to make a quick decision, as I was preparing for the sixth annual leadership and management congress the following morning, which one of my non-profit organizations, Alleem Business Congress, had organized. I was at sixes and sevens!

I consulted with good friends and colleagues, 99% of whom told me I shouldn't accept the position: "big no, you can't do that"; "it's not plain sailing"; "it's a very complicated world out there"; "it's going to be your Waterloo." Scenarios like these often bring feelings of isolation and fear. However, deep inside me, there was a voice that said yes, definitely yes, the most powerful word in the world. With an 'I believe I can do it' mindset, I accepted the appointment because it came directly from the President of the Sharjah Government, whom I love and respect for who he is and his leadership philosophies.

There was no doubt in my mind that SEWA's transformation would be difficult, but someone had to do it and do it well. Despite all the confusion and uncertainty, I followed my *intuition* and decided to accept the position. I was committed, emotionally and intellectually, to do all I could to help it succeed. We all know that 'with God, all things are possible.'

Executive Order

Without delay, the very next day, the executive order of my appointment as the new Chairman of SEWA was given and issued, but not made public, because His Highness wanted to see me personally first and share his words of wisdom. Indeed, my mind was full of thoughts and big ideas, as I thought to myself, *Transformation cannot happen without emotional investment. How will I frame my transformation game plan and present its roadmap? What will I do first? What are my top priorities?*

Zero Hour

His Highness wanted to meet with me at 9 a.m. the following morning to appoint me as the new chairman officially. I still remember that *defining* moment when he signed the executive order in front of me and issued it to the public. This act was followed by a private meeting in his office, where he gave me some personal directions and instructions, explaining the way forward. Almost before the ink was dry on the executive order, the news spread like wildfire and was soon the talk of the entire country. As the announcement reached the blogosphere and other social media channels, it gained momentum and was tweeted and retweeted thousands and thousands of times, acquiring traffic even through my personal Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram accounts.

It was decided that I was to report to His Highness directly without intervening board members to ensure speedy and efficient

decision making. SEWA's performance had to improve rapidly to rescue the authority from expected bankruptcy—a struggling brand in obvious decline. The transformation must be both bold and rapid to be successful. The story is interesting in itself, despite the odds.

How, then, did I save SEWA from its brush with bankruptcy? Well, I took an approach that has *not* been discussed and codified in the business literature, and the goal of this book is to define and explain the approach. I assure you, if applied appropriately, this approach can help recover any organization of any size. It wasn't all a matter of clearing the decks, though. I had to immerse myself in the world of SEWA, a highly bureaucratic, slow moving, hierarchical, and complex organization.

Making a Commitment to Lead

There was no turning back and no backpedaling. Surely, this event was a turning point in my life. I felt thrown into a moment of truth, and indeed, it was a transformational moment. I recognized that this was going to be the most difficult assignment I had ever been asked to do, which was self-evident, as His Highness had given me the responsibility personally. I knew that right then and there, I was re-defining myself. His Highness's order definitely filled me with pangs of inner conflict. One voice beckoned me back to the security of my comfort zone, yet another pulled me forward so powerfully that I simply couldn't say no to realize the business' continued prosperity.

It's Lonely at the Top

We can either keep on cruising along the same old track, or we can veer off the path and forge our own trail. I told myself, *Rashid, it's time you write a brand-new script for your business life. Just go that extra mile...but remember, that extra mile is a lonely place.*

I thought, "Every person needs his or her own personal proving place, and this is mine. I'm here!" I like what the philosopher William

James once said, “Seek out that particular mental attitude which makes you feel deeply and vitally alive, along with which comes the inner voice which says, ‘this is the real me,’ and when you have found that attitude, follow it.”

However, when I was starting out, I scrambled around for advice, data, or anything else that might help me to rock the boat.

It was one of those daring moments when life called to me, “*Well, here’s your chance. Show me what you have.*” Well, I am not a debutant! I have experienced many of these dramatic shifts over the past two decades. My daring moments have been turning points. Hence, I took the plunge. It was inevitable that I would have to struggle against a myriad of obstacles and challenges to restore the authority’s image and reinstate its honorable position in the country. Doing so required significant internal cultural and brand changes.

Taking Charge

Leading can be a strenuous mental and physical activity, and I wanted to be engaged in it fully, not peripherally. I wanted to have a real influence on SEWA, where I could see the direct results of my actions. I always believe that if you are going to do something, you must make a total commitment to the task at hand. I wanted to make a commitment not only to save the business but also turn it around so that it became highly profitable.

When I took the helm at SEWA, the organization desperately needed a leader who could set the agenda and point the organization in the right direction. His Highness wanted me to be the ‘Mr. Fix-It,’ who could do both of these things.

I concluded that SEWA could be prepared for the future only through a complete overhaul of its management processes and a top-to-bottom transformation of its culture. As a leader, my primary responsibilities are to set the direction and remove the roadblocks so that the organization and its people succeed, and this doesn’t happen when people think what they’re doing is meaningless.

Break the Rules

SEWA had adopted a command and control management style, and teamwork didn't exist. The place was managed with an iron fist. I wanted to use a new language of leadership to create a professionally managed firm where making decisions is delegated to the right people and where participation on the part of many levels of management is encouraged. I saw the need for a system that would allow me to draw upon the knowledge, talents, and judgment of others in the organization, a system that gives us the opportunity to tap into the creative powers of everyone in the organization. I also wanted to create a more agile and streamlined SEWA. The management rules and culture that had worked earlier had become a *handicap*, and speed is a valuable feature. As the saying goes, I was skating on thin ice.

I knew that I had to break the 'golden rules.' I don't mean to do or suggest anything unethical or illegal. Instead, I mean advocating the need to change habit patterns, break familiar rhythms, and turn stones that 'shouldn't' be turned. There were patterns and anchors in the organization that somehow had evolved into 'holy rules.'

Do I Have What it Takes?

I believe that it takes *courage* to break the rules, and when you begin to change the way things have been done for years, you need *confidence* that what you're doing is right. You also must be *committed* because people will make fun of you or challenge your ability by saying, "You're totally wrong," and "This is how we've always done it." However, I say, "Life is tough, and dreams do often come true. And I'm a dreamer. I always want to dream big. But, we need to remember that dreams are not a blueprint; they simply provide a vision. It is the starting point. Without a dream, we have no direction. As the old expression says, 'If you don't know where you're going, any path will get you there.' "

The Seeds of Change

Change has to start somewhere, and I wanted to transform *behaviors* and achieve results. Leading has its own language. At last count, there are roughly five thousand languages spoken in the world today, and the language that crosses all borders, cultures, industry types, and organizational sizes is the language of results-oriented leadership. When you know exactly what you want, believe in yourself, and have a plan of action, the potential for success becomes limitless. When you're clear about what success means to you, opportunities will present themselves, new doors will open, and to your amazement, anything will be possible.

All of this convinced me that it was time for a change in management and process reengineering. It was time to approach the project strategy in a different way and transform SEWA processes from mechanical activity to something deeper and more meaningful immediately, as in overnight!

A Hodgepodge

To add to the challenges mentioned above, SEWA had deeper issues. In addition to overrun projects and poor project execution, the brand was *murdered* through mismanagement. This added to the list of never-ending challenges. Throughout the book, you will find out how I dealt with the other nine in more detail. The top nine challenges I had to face at the outset are as follows:

1. US \$4 billion in debt.
2. Creditors wanted payment for goods and services that had been delivered a long time ago.
3. An over-staffed and under-skilled workforce of about 5,500 employees.
4. Very low staff morale.

5. Unfair and misleading pricing strategies.
6. Aging power plants, equipment, and substations (phase-out was needed).
7. Very high interest rates for the existing bank loans (as high as 9%).
8. Good employees wanted to retain their jobs and benefits.
9. Most importantly, overrun projects, mainly due to fuzzy objectives.

Focus Your Attention

“Concentrate all your thoughts on the task at hand.
The sun’s rays do not burn until brought into focus.”

— Alexander Graham Bell

These challenges can be at odds with one another and hamper the project management efforts. I knew that my attention needed to be focused on all nine areas. Humans are simply more efficient and effective when they concentrate. Norman Vincent Peale once said,

“When every physical and mental resource is focused,
one’s power to solve multiplies tremendously.”

On top of these challenges was SEWA’s frustrated customers, who felt misled, mistreated, and ignored.

I threw myself into the job and gave it my full attention. I was passionate about everything. I wanted to be the best, serve the best, and do the best. My passion showed in everything I did. I always believe that however bad it may seem, we always get over it eventually. I was emotionally involved.

SEWA’s turnaround was the most impactful, biggest, and quickest transformation that I have ever managed. SEWA went from the worst to the best performing government authority in the Middle East. The financial results and service performance were outstanding. A sweeping change like this takes commitment, persistence, and time.

A THOROUGH TURNAROUND

If you'd like to create the same kind of turnaround, you have come to the right place. Together, we will go on a journey of transformation.



WHAT TO DO

“All serious daring starts from within.”

— Eudora Welty

If you ask any project manager about the challenges one might face in the industry, a typical list will look like this:

- Insufficient commitment from project sponsors.
- Unclear requirements/scope.
- Inexperienced team members.
- Poor planning.
- Lack of formal project management processes.
- Cultural issues.
- Unclear roles of team members, including that of the project manager.
- Inadequate communication.

The smorgasbord of challenges listed above were not unknown to SEWA. In fact, SEWA was mired in the quicksand of challenges, stuck in a mucky substance, and sinking down into the muck.

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Overcoming the Obstacles

Being on a roll in ‘do mode’ is a wonderful feeling. At first, it seemed like a nightmare that was much too big to handle! Then, I remembered that most opportunities come wrapped in a black box labeled ‘problem.’ I zeroed in on two things that would enable me to transform the organization’s project management office: (1) bring the authority up to His Highness’s expectations, and (2) please the society by striking the right balance between the organization’s commercial and social obligations. It can feel like being caught in powerful cross-currents. I was in a race against time.

Where the Change Starts

Based on my previous business turnarounds and experiences with other organizations over the past twenty years, I thought the most

important step to start with was establishing a set of core values and guiding principles to help us navigate through the turbulent times. I wanted to identify all the limiting factors that could hamper my focus. In fact, I wanted to focus all of my energies on alleviating that single choke point.

There is no doubt that values and timeless principles matter in managing change and turnarounds!

I thought to myself, *first, we must walk the talk*. We should ask ourselves whether the things we do every day match who we are and who we want to be. Second, we needed a successful project management model in place to execute and sustain our projects. However, this caused me to say to myself, *Will it be easy? Do I have the ability to change things more dramatically than ever before in the history of SEWA? Does it mean I will have to work eight days a week?*

Let's find out the answers!

From 'Me' to 'We'

As Halford E. Luccock, a prominent American Methodist minister stated,

“No one can whistle a symphony.
It takes a whole orchestra to play it.”

I told myself, *Nobody exists in a vacuum — and nobody succeeds in one either*. At this moment, a friend's advice echoed in my mind; “To pull yourself up by the bootstraps and forge your own path is noble but hardly anyone does it alone. There is an African proverb that says,

“If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.”

You need other partners, smart hires, advisors, mentors, and even stories of people who have already done it before. My ultimate goal was to be a leader who people would be proud to follow, not one people have to follow.

It was not an easy moment. The challenges ahead of me were mighty—mammoth in size—and time galloped by.

I have been an ardent believer in teaming up. However, I believe that the simpler your view of what you do, the more power and focus you will have in doing it. Therefore, I am sharing simple fundamentals that I've adhered to all my life to make teamwork work. Don't be misled. Simple doesn't mean easy!

Do I Really Need a Leadership Team?

This is, perhaps, a very important question in this chapter. Success is never achieved by leadership alone. Throughout my business life, the maximum number of members I have included in a project leadership team is nine, and I love calling them the *nine champions*. I always advise not having more than nine diverse, knowledgeable, skilful, and smart employees who have a hunger for creativity and possess the 'passion to win for the customers.'

Hire Great People

A good leader ensures that he is surrounded by the right people, whose strengths balance out his weaknesses. I am highly inspired by Peter Drucker's famous quote,

“The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant.”

Each team member has a unique role, abilities, accountability, and responsibility to energize SEWA's culture. My secret for selecting them is simple. They are nice, hard-working, ambitious, disciplined, and well-educated. Among the nine, I have included people who are wise and have considerable experience working under difficult conditions and overcoming SEWA's old 'this is how it's always been done around here' culture.

I ardently believe that project management requires an expert project team that looks ahead to anticipate issues and risks and then

mitigate them before they have an effect on projects. Therefore, choosing the right team and keeping it *humming* is crucial. Yes, even more crucial than making heads or tails of Gantt and PERT charts.

Stop for a Moment

One important point here is that I always include the trouble-makers or resistive ones, whatever you may call them, on my team. It's convenient to surround ourselves with agreeable news and amicable people who share our worldview. However, I would recommend shunning your believers. Resist the urge to sand off the edges and fit in. Go for misfits! I am very fond of Steve Jobs' famous quote that glorifies the nutty ones:

“Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the trouble-makers, the round pegs in the square holes...the ones who see things differently—they're not fond of rules...You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things...they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

The Super-Chicken Model

There's something alluring—and commonsensical—about the notion that if you have just enough A-players in an organization, you'll succeed. One management theorist called this 'the super-chicken model,' where you collect as many status-striving, alpha types as possible. While a few A-players can be enormously helpful, it's possible that success is not about out-hiring the competition for these people. It is more about the way you form teams, and then, the way people work together as teams. In short, while we need to take race, gender, and other issues into account to create diverse teams, we also need diversity in status.

If a team includes too many high-status people—‘stars’ or ‘A-players,’ as they are known more commonly—they will compete for social standing and fail to consider others’ ideas. To make matters worse, the more status people have, the more they crave it, according to University of California-Berkeley social psychologist Cameron Anderson. He refers to it as the ‘drug-like effects’ of status, and it’s ruinous effects on collaboration. The other A-player extreme is they make all the decisions, plan all the action, and then tell everybody what to do.

‘It’s a Small World’ Team

When it comes to team building, I live by my definition of a team, which is, “A team is a selected group of people with different abilities, talents, experiences, and backgrounds who have come together for a shared purpose. Despite their individual differences, the common goal provides the thread that defines them as a team.” Remember, when your team is motivated and unified, they’ll do some things differently. They’ll stay passionate and focused throughout the project lifecycle. I believe when unified people are given a clear, meaningful, purpose, they are able to move forward faster, overcoming challenges even when the leaders are absent.

I have always surrounded myself with a team of hard-charging managers who shared both my values and work ethic. I want people who dare to be different. They challenge your thinking, fuel your ideas, boost your competitive edge, and make you and your business a winner. By surrounding myself with such competent people, I was able to focus on the big picture while others helped with daily operations. I experienced higher morale, more enthusiasm, and speedier decision making.

The late American anthropologist Margaret Mead once said,

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens, can change the world, it is the only thing that ever has.”

I have never been in a big group that worked well. It's more likely to spark controversy than closeness. Countless studies have shown the benefits of smaller teams. Most teams struggle simply because they are too large. I like what Jeff Bezos said,

“If you can't feed the team with two pizzas, it's too large.”

In summary, a leadership team should consist of a small group of people who are responsible, collectively, for achieving a common objective for their organization. A smaller group really is the best way to become connected on a deeper level with other people on the team. I have always believed in a small team, in which every member stays involved all the way through a project. It also is easy to transfer your vision to a small team. The questions you have to ask yourself are as follows:

1. What do I want them to know?
2. What do I want them to do?
3. What do I want them to achieve?

The result is fewer mistakes, higher efficiency, and greater productivity.

What it Takes to Make Them Great

First and foremost, while forming a winning team, I look for nine basic attributes. Throughout my life, I have formed successful teams by implementing the following basic nine tenets of team formulation:

1. Vision and Purpose—Where is the team going? And why?
2. Passion—Passion and passionate energy. They move and they see opportunity.
3. Shared values—Passionate about the work they are doing.
4. Goal—Have a clear common goal.

5. Size—Have the smallest number of people possible on board.
6. Thinkers—Right-brain thinkers and left-brain thinkers.
7. Shared Roles—Hold them accountable. Avoid finger pointing, misunderstandings, and stepping on others’ toes.
8. Leadership—Inspire teams to accomplish tasks.
9. Stay focused—Strive to achieve and say no to any activity that would divert their efforts.

While these kinds of attributes seem obvious in retrospect, time and again, I see leaders overlooking them. Once you’ve followed these tenets, be assured that the team is primed to hammer away at any obstacle. They can ‘wring the towel’ and get the last ounce of possibility out of any idea.

Unbeatable Team

However, there is an effective formula for hiring: focus on multi-ability people who share the company’s values and principles. They’re the ones who will not only fit into the culture but also strengthen it. Andy Lansing, the CEO of Levy Restaurants, says, “Levy has a non-traditional approach to hiring. I hire for two traits—I hire for nice, and I hire for passion . . . if you give me someone who is nice and passionate, I can teach them everything else . . . if you give me someone with those two traits, they will, nine out of ten times, be a great success in the company.” I couldn’t agree more.

The Nine Champions: The Winning Team

I cannot emphasize enough how important the selection and sorting out of people is. I once said in an interview, “We hire for attitude, not aptitude.” Personality matters. Once again, we’re in the business of enriching lives. There is the saying,

“Birds of a feather flock together.”

I am constantly in search of people who have a passion to serve with a larger purpose. By structuring the company this way, I am putting SEWA's core cultural values front and center. These core values are proving to be a magnet for the 'right' employees—those who, in turn, help enrich the organization's culture.

It didn't surprise me to see Jeff Weiner, the CEO at LinkedIn, leave a post on LinkedIn on October 27, 2018, declaring that the jobs of the future require two major attributes—soft skills and empathy. He argued that artificial intelligence (AI) can accomplish everything that humans can do (including coding), but robots can't equip themselves with team synthesizing qualities or communication skills. Therefore, creating a company culture is a very important step to ensure a successful turnaround and transformation for any business.

When I was almost finished writing this paragraph, I came across a book entitled, *Tough Calls from the Corner Office*. I was quite intrigued with the review of this book because it claimed to offer invaluable insights into the minds of CEOs. The book looked promising to me, and honestly speaking, it was consistent with my thoughts about the importance of the corporate culture inside any organization. Below is one of my favorite paragraphs from the book, where the author describes the meaning of corporate culture as the following:

Corporate culture is a company's value system, its DNA, its personality. Corporate culture defines the shared goals that drive executives as well as rank-and-file employees. It determines which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. It encompasses a code of conduct that people intuitively draw upon when they deal with fellow employees inside the company and with customers or vendors outside of it. If you ever hear someone say, 'That kind of approach is encouraged here,' or, 'That would never fly here,' the speaker is probably referring to the company's culture. Corporate culture starts from the top and is driven by management into all the nooks and crannies of the organization.

Who's Who in SEWA Project Management

To meet our SEWA project objectives, I needed the right people on board with talent, energy, and optimism who also had a clear understanding of their roles. Good people are valuable beyond measure. Here's a breakdown of who does what. Let's get to know the nine project champions and their basic roles:

1. The chief imagineering officer promotes a blend of imagination and engineering by ensuring that the team applies whole-brain thinking to projects.
2. The chief flexitricity officer ensures that the team has clear objectives and that everyone is involved and committed.
3. The chief efficienology officer questions effectiveness and presses for continuous improvement and results.
4. The chief greenification officer urges the team to get on with the job at hand and performs practical tasks.
5. The chief design-thinking officer generates carefully considered ideas and weighs and refines others' ideas.
6. The chief culture officer eases tension, helps address personal agendas or conflicts, makes things easier, and maintains harmony.
7. The chief sustainalytics officer maintains schedules and ensures that all members stay on the same page.
8. The chief FinTech officer advises the team about any risks that may arise along the way.
9. The chief SHEngineering officer provides inspiration and can view situations and opportunities with innate simplicity.

As evident above, the SEWA project management team was diverse. Diversity within teams creates a paradox as it has been demonstrated that diverse teams have better performance; this team was unique and extraordinary because it could do the following:

- Spot problems early.
- Make needed changes quickly.
- Trust the emergent process.
- Embrace the highest good.

This special team is chaired by me. Each of the team members reports to me directly. Being the chairperson, my province is to provide resources, remove roadblocks, and make tough decisions to control risk and minimize uncertainty, as well as determine when to disband the team.

One Note of Caution

Free riders. Have you ever heard about them? No? Let me tell you who they are and give you a little warning about them. These are team members who obtain the benefits of membership without doing their share of the work. It's probably the ultimate reason why the SEWA project's nine champions are given specific and unique job titles and roles. Over the years, I have experienced project team members who initially show excitement about adding value to the project, but the energy soon fizzles, and they turn into free riders —these team members cannot be tolerated.

The heart of any project, and the true engine of its work, is its team members, which is why bringing together the right people is extremely important. As you read the book, you will discover that I had to add some new team members and bid good-bye to others over time as tasks and needs changed.

One may ask, is this the end-all and be-all? Handpick the best minds of your organization, and they, in turn, whip up successful projects for you?

We'll find out in the following chapters.



MY PRIORITY

*“A good plan implemented today is better than
a perfect plan implemented tomorrow.”*

— George Patton

My priority was productivity—the ability to organize existing resources to get more output. And to my belief, positivity breeds productivity.

Tools for the Journey

After setting distinct and definitive priorities for the team and assigning duties, obligations, and responsibilities, I wanted to pick up the right tools to help the team achieve its mission and goals.

We worked on our software and hardware needs. We asked our IT department, the ‘Deep Divers Team,’ to determine our computer requirements. I knew then that I needed to keep going; I couldn’t wait for the perfect moment to come, as the saying goes,

“If you wait for the perfect conditions,
you will never get anything done.”

This is another example of ‘taking care of the champions.’ I had to give my champions the tools they needed to get their job done, as well as improve their productivity and overall performance.

Managing for Success

It was an early Sunday morning in March in Sharjah, the cultural capital of the UAE. On that day, I had called a meeting of senior managers to unveil my new project management model.

Hence, I started with positive surroundings. I invited the team for breakfast. I'd been a frequent visitor to Al Rawi book cafe, a bookshop cafe that honors storytellers and their tales. The café is situated at the Al Majaz waterfront, a prime location known for its lush green landscapes and mouthwatering eateries, undoubtedly why it's also described as the heart of Sharjah city.

I wanted to have a very candid discussion with the team under the theme 'can we save SEWA's waning reputation in project management?'

Primarily, I wanted to listen to and act on the insights of my young team and hoped to benefit from their ambition. This also meant giving the young guns plenty of opportunity to tackle projects that have a significant effect on the community.

To make them feel at home and at ease, I welcomed them all with an ear to ear smile.

"What a wonderful, beautiful, marvelous day," I said. While looking into their faces, I continued, "A very good morning to all of you."

They responded, "A very good morning to you too, sir."

I greeted them. "Feel proud of yourselves. Each one of you is special." I continued, "SEWA considers you to be champions. I trust your ability to make a difference in managing our projects."

I could see the young team getting infused with zeal and gusto.

"You've been selected, rather exclusively chosen to confront the mammoth-size obstacles and challenges involved in completing our projects. It's no secret that things aren't going well around here; our performance numbers and statistics, across the board, are terrible, and customers are unhappy. Our projects are underperforming." I stopped for a few seconds and then continued, "So, I've decided to tighten things up by implementing a new management system that I call *authentic*. Let me tell you how it works. I'll walk you through my personal philosophy of defining an authentic vision, which I always like to call a 'true vision'."

They were all ears.

“We’ve heard business leaders talking about their organization’s visions,” Jose, the chief FinTech officer said. “What’s new about ‘true vision?’”

My True Vision Philosophy

I smiled and answered, “Almost all business leaders have a vision to lead their unit towards success, but very few have what I call a true vision.”

“But how do we define it?” the chief culture officer asked.

I answered, “*A true vision* is when your heart carries your values, beliefs, timeless principles, and fundamentals, which work alongside your mind, where business objectives, performance, and challenges are carried. In this case, your mind acts like a manager *in* a system, while your heart acts as a leader *on* the system. Thus, true leadership is a robust and dynamic process; a dance between two poles, each taking the lead, each following the other, but it is the heart that molds, interprets, communicates, and portrays the vision.”

I looked around and asked, “Got it?”

“Nice philosophy, I like it,” the chief FinTech officer said.

I continued, “So, brace up, you’ll have to use your elbow grease. You will all have to sweat it out day in and day out. Are you all ready for the everyday hard work and to thrive on the challenges ahead of you?”

Kumar, the chief design-thinking officer immediately spoke first.

“Sir, we are grateful to have been your preferred choice. It seems that you have selected us to overcome Herculean stumbling blocks.”

“I appreciate your feelings,” I acquiesced. “Rest assured that we are gathered here for a special reason. It’s about our project’s performance.”

“Wow, that’s fantastic. We are really excited about today’s meeting,” May, the chief imagineering officer, said with a smile.

“Can’t bear this suspense anymore, sir?” Jose added.

I smiled and said, “All right. Now, raise your hands if you’ve been involved in any of SEWA’s projects recently, regardless of whether they are technical or non-technical, big or small.”

I could sense that a couple of them were hesitant to raise their hands.

Sensing their skepticism, I said, “There is no blame-game here. You must move out of your comfort zone into your discomfort zone. Speak freely. Today is your day. Have your say.”

Their faces brightened, and all of them raised their hands!

My face lit up with excitement.

“Got it? Great,” I continued. “Bravo! I was expecting this,” I said. “Now, coming back to SEWA’s projects, tell me, how many of these projects have been completed on time and reaped satisfactory results?”

All hands came down fast. Very fast.

I said, “This explains it all. This is the very reason why we’ve gathered here. You all are involved in projects, but none of you have an exciting or a satisfactory story to share.” I continued, “Now, I want one of you to explain the underlying reason for our sad project stories.”

Jose pointed out, “There’s a plethora of reasons. Sometimes, we experience manpower shortages, and at other times, we creep up our project scope. It is a long, long list!”

I interrupted, “And then we play the blame game. Please listen. I don’t want to turn this meeting into a blamestorming session.”

“We are probably missing the real reasons here. We don’t know why our projects fail, despite the project team preparing an endless stream of reports on and analyses of the project.” Hassan, the chief flexitricity officer responded.

I interrupted again. “And when finished, the stack of reports are almost one-foot in height. Right?” I questioned. “These are excuses and I do not want to hear them anymore.”

Pin drop silence prevailed.

I said, “It may sound funny, but I want all of you to think seriously about SEWA projects from now on. Today, of course, the rules are different. We need to inculcate the work ethics needed to complete our projects successfully. The winners will be those who figure them out.”

Was it hard to change our old ways and habits?

Absolutely!

This is where the adventure and journey begin in a highly conversational style

So, take a breath, slow down, and let's begin the powerful journey that the SEWA project management model has for us.



PROJECTS, PROJECTS, AND PROJECTS

The Challenges and Trade-Offs

I began, “Dear associates, you might be wondering why I have repeated the word projects in the slide up there. Here’s the reason; when I took over the chairman’s position at SEWA, I was confronted with mammoth-sized challenges, particularly with the organization’s mega projects. The projects were draining/sapping a lot of resources, mainly money and time. What’s more, they caused sleepless nights, sleep-walking nights, and nightmarish nights! I was confronted with projects that had experienced massive scope creeps.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, before we start a project, we need to persuade our shareholders and stakeholders and the organization in general that the project will solve a problem or address a need. Only when this is accomplished is it worth investing the necessary time, money, and manpower.”

Everyone was listening carefully.

I continued, “In fact, the projects have been on ‘no-scope’ mode for many years! On the other hand, SEWA has also had a long list of ‘never-ending’ projects, some of which are *creeping*; these are always-on projects. Finally, some are ‘malnourished’ projects; that is, those on the verge of death due to a lack of ‘healthy-balanced’ resources.”

This haunted me! Here's a list of the major complications I had to cope with during my initial days at SEWA:

- Lack of visibility and clarity in all projects.
- Insufficient resources (funding and personnel).
- Unclear project objectives.
- Schedule and cost overruns.
- Starting projects but not finishing them on time.
- Managing scope creep.
- Poor communication management.
- A non-collaborative working atmosphere.

And the list goes on and on!

While looking at each team member, I asked, "Don't you agree?"

Fatima, the chief SHEngineering officer, said, "Sir, I totally agree with you here. Over the years, SEWA managers have developed a few useful tactics for achieving profitable project outcomes. However, when trying to apply them, SEWA frequently encounters new obstacles and trade-offs. The reason, in my opinion, is that internal bureaucracy, red tape, and complexity have prevented the existing talent from thinking in new and innovative ways."

Face the Issues

In a nutshell, the organization was losing its focus. Although I had listed the dissonances, they were only half of the story—the remainder concerned how to tackle such mighty challenges. I knew that I was the lone warrior and savior. In short, I had to act like Japanese Samurai warriors to rescue the situation. In this situation, I reminded myself of a quote by Aldous Huxley:

"Experience is not what happens to you.
It's what you do with what happens to you."

Take Action

It's a worthy aim, but where should I start? The above challenges were like a shot in the arm. My priority, then, was to redress the mega projects. Being an academician and a corporate leader, I borrowed my thoughts and wisdom from both the theoretical and practical backgrounds and viewed SEWA projects in my own way. Now was the time to cut the challenges into bite-sized chunks, but how? To straighten things out, I capitalized on my intellect, information, and knowledge garnered in managing differently-sized projects during my entire working life.

Lastly, to 'size-up' the projects and find that breakthrough moment, I sketched out a fool-proof plan that would put the projects back on track and mitigate the associated challenges. This wouldn't happen by duplicating existing models already. The mathematician George E. P. Box once remarked,

“Essentially all models are wrong, but some are useful.”

I hope you will find our project management model a little less wrong and a little more useful than the alternatives. Being a huge organization with over 5500 employees, as well as rendering electricity, water, and natural piped gas to a population of over 1.5 million people was bound to involve a host of long-term projects. Hence, I began with the long-term complex projects with the intention of either increasing future revenue or reducing future expenditures.

Was my journey difficult? It sure was.

Did I overcome the obstacles? Indeed, yes.

Was I alone? Not really. I had my nine project champions.

I was filled with passion and vision; I called for a kick-off meeting with my team the very next day.



THE IRON TRIANGLE

It was well past midday. The nine project champions had gathered in our newest meeting room, ‘the Room of Possibilities.’ The room was overflowing with excitement and positivity. All of them showed up. No one was missing.

You have chosen gems! I said to myself.

I said, “Thank you all for participating in today’s meeting. Indeed, it’s a remarkable day today. We are going to make some tangible changes in the way we handle projects here. Today is the beginning of a transformational journey.”

“Whoa, quite interesting!” exclaimed Ghada, the chief greenification officer.

“Now, let me make this more interesting for all of us. Let’s dig in; who would like to explain the project management success triangle?” I inquired.

“Is it the project management iron triangle we’re talking about here?” asked Ghada, the chief greenification officer.

“Yes, indeed,” I replied.

She said, “Ahh, you must be challenging us. We’ve been doing project’s for years now. That’s a piece of cake.” She continued, “The project management success triangle is all about delivering the projects outcome within the established scope, time, cost, and level of quality.”

“Well said,” I said ruefully. “That’s the answer I was expecting. Such a typical answer! However, that’s the traditional way of managing projects. But, for us, it’s high time we move beyond the traditional iron triangle!” I exclaimed.

Ghada's mouth dropped open.

I said, "I would like to introduce my new golden triangle of project management to you all."

"Really! Is there a golden triangle too? We didn't know this," Masud, the chief sustainalytics officer said while scratching his head.

"Surprisingly, there is one," I replied with a smirk.

"Please tell us more," replied Ahmed Babiker, the chief culture officer.

Jose, the chief FinTech officer, inquired, "What point do you want us to bring home?"

I replied, "I want to put in plain English that the central task of projects is to combine the works of different people into a singular, coherent whole that will be useful to people or customers."

The team gaped at each other. Perhaps my statement changed their perception of projects in general.

"And what about the golden triangle of project management that you spoke about a while ago?" Fatima, the chief SHEngineering officer, asked.

I replied, "Yes, I am coming to that. My golden triangle is unconventional, not typical—it's atypical."

"We are eagerly waiting to learn what it is all about," the team said in a chorus.

"All right. I'll spill the beans. My project management golden triangle states that, henceforth, all the projects SEWA undertakes shall be completed on time, below budget, and within scope, as well as delight the customer. That's my prime objective," I declared.

Moments of silence passed.

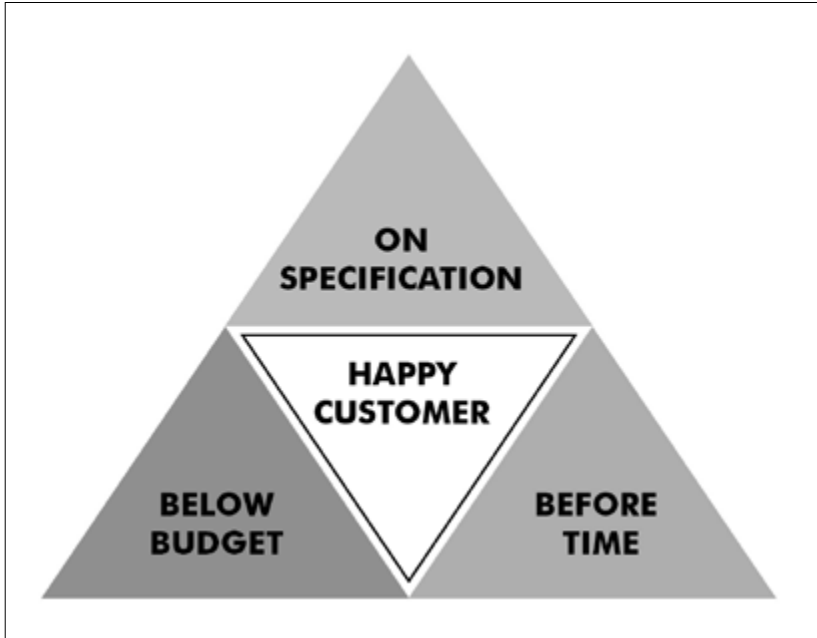
"Before I proceed with the presentation, let me share with you about a project that was recently completed on time, below budget, and exceeds my expectations—It's the SEWA O2 Room."

I continued, "It's a room with pure oxygen bars for SEWA employees to feel refreshed and render heightened concentration, alertness, and memory. All of the oxygen concentrators are compliant with the FDA and are CSA and CE approved."

"I love the way this project was executed with precision and planning. It complies with my golden triangle."

The team listened in awe.

“Now, team, please look at the screen, the infographic shown summarizes the triangle,” I said.



I could see raised eyebrows, crossed arms, and clenched jaws.

“Sounds good? Any questions?” I asked.

“Does this mean we’ve been doing projects haphazardly?” asked May, the chief imagineering officer. “You’ve made us seem incompetent in the eyes of our peers.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” I replied. “I’m just trying to lend a helping hand.”

“Do you want us to start gold-plating our deliverables?” asked Masud, the chief sustainalytics officer.

I replied, “Not at all. Gold-plating the deliverables after the scope has been agreed to can be very costly. In addition, the customer might be led to believe that they can get these gold-plated “add-ons” for free on future projects because a new standard has been set.”

The chief culture officer added, “Yes, we shouldn’t fall into this habit as it will inevitably come back to haunt us.”

“What do you mean?” Masud asked while raising his eyebrows.

I smiled and said, “Let me answer this. A little over a decade ago, something unexpected happened in the banking sector in the United States, sending out huge ripples that shook the financial industry, both in the United States and across the globe.”

“Can anyone tell me which incident am I talking about?” I inquired.

“The global meltdown?” the chief culture officer asked hesitatingly.

I said, “Yes, you got it right. I am referring to the global meltdown of 2008; however, I would like to point out the Lehman Brothers scandal.”

I continued, “On September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy protection, thereby shaking consumer confidence in the economy and sending out the message that no institution was too big to fail.”

“What was so special about the Lehman Brother collapse? Enron collapsed before Lehman Brothers,” Fatima said.

I replied, “The collapse of Lehman Brothers was significant for a number of reasons. At the time of filing for bankruptcy, the bank had \$639 billion in assets and \$619 in debt, making this the largest bankruptcy filing ever, even surpassing the collapse of other giants, such as Enron and WorldCom.”

I continued, in the same breadth, “In fact, Lehman’s bankruptcy filing was more than one and a half times the size of Sweden’s GDP in the same year. What made Lehman Brother’s bankruptcy filing even more shocking was that it came less than a year after the bank had posted its biggest profits ever and after repeated assurances by the bank’s chief executives that its leverage was manageable, liquidity levels were high, and the bank’s overall finances were looking good. They gold-plated the truth!”

“Quite often, I have noticed that the project manager becomes the dumping ground for all problems that the project team cannot resolve. Remember the story of the Titanic, the “unsinkable” ship.

How many more would have survived if the Captain had called for help the minute they struck the iceberg?” I continued, “I’m sorry to say, the way we are functioning seems like a vicious circle to me.”

“But, the field of project management is an ever-moving target, isn’t it?” asked Afra, the chief efficienology officer.

“Yes, I couldn’t agree more. But, as Henry Miller, the author of *A Devil in Paradise*, stated,

“One’s destination is never a place,
but rather a new way of looking at things.”

“In short, I want you all to take into account the views/opinions of our shareholders and stakeholders,” I stated.

The room lapsed into silence.



DO US A FLAVOR

Afra, the chief efficienology officer, broke the silence by saying, “We are of two minds now. Mixed feelings. Mixed emotions.”

At first, I thought of ducking the question. Then, I told myself, *Don't give up, you can clear any possible shadow of doubt. You aren't going to capture their hearts with theory alone. Tell them something pragmatic—a real success story. People love stories.*

“Look, let me make it easier for you guys,” I said. “Those who own the data own the future. Data is the new oil. Let’s take the example of something familiar—like Frito-Lay.”

“The potato chips company?” the chief imagineering officer asked.

“Yum, chips are mouth-watering,” the chief sustainalytics officer said. “I just love all the flavors,” he continued.

I smiled and said, “Indeed, most of us do. But, does anyone know who’s behind those deliciously seasoned potato chips?”

“No way. It’s a tough world out there. Even potatoes have a story to tell!” said Masud.

Yes, the Frito-Lay thing seemed to hit the mark, I told myself.

I said in an excited tone, “Would you like to hear the story?”

I could see a big yes in their eyes.

I continued, “Here’s an appetizing story behind Frito-Lay’s scrumptious chips. In 2012, Frito-Lay launched in the U.S. what would become a winning annual contest, the ‘Do Us a Flavor’ campaign, which crowd-sourced ideas for new potato chip flavors. The company had already tested the campaign in other countries, generating a whopping eight million submissions.”

“Sorry, did you say eight million? How did it work?” the chief FinTech officer inquired.

I answered, “Contestants submit flavor ideas on the ‘Do Us a Flavor’ website; they choose a catchy title, up to three ingredients, create a quick pitch, and design the bag. A judging panel of experts narrows it down to three winning flavors. Then, the flavors enter the product development pipeline, during which recipes are developed and tested by the Frito-Lay team. The winner gets one million dollars or 1% of the flavor’s net sales in that year, whichever is greater.”

“Ohh, one million dollars or more. Wow, that’s amazing. It simply blows my mind away,” replied Jose, the chief FinTech officer.

“That’s because, it touches a human chord. We all want our voices to be heard and talked about,” I replied.

“That’s a great story! Simple, yet incredible. I am going to tell my kids about it,” Masud, the chief sustainability officer, said.

I leaned back in my chair and said, “As the American researcher Casandra Brené Brown says,

“Stories are data with soul”

Communicate Your Story

“Let me tell you another story that’s more relatable and will give you a glimpse of the magic of brand engagement,” I continued.

“Really? Please tell us,” replied Ahmed Babiker, the chief culture officer.

“This story is about two of our colleagues. Boutheina, our chief branding officer, and Mariam, the newly recruited technical marketing engineer. On April 22, 2019, they were invited to attend the ‘Accenture: Design and Tech Talks’ forum, which was held in partnership with BusinessLive ME.”

“Wow, what an opportunity! I always enjoy technical networking. It keeps you up-to-date on what’s going on in the business world,” exclaimed the chief SHEngineering officer.

“It was a half-day conference at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Dubai. This invitation-only event focused on what’s ahead in ‘Design and Technology,’” I continued.

Afra, the chief efficienology officer, pointed out, “I’m sure the event must have featured high-level presentations and panel discussions covering all the key aspects of building amazing experiences with technology and realities of the post-digital era.”

“Indeed, it was an incredible event. But the story that I want to share is slightly different,” I replied.

The chief SHEngineering officer asked, “What is it, sir?”

I replied, “During the event, they happened to meet a top official from SAP who attended the conference that day; the official explained that they are very keen on working with SEWA. He said that he has been hearing about the transformational leadership and the new management philosophies of SEWA and was keen on exploring ways to collaborate and co-create.”

“That’s great news,” the chief imagineering officer said.

“There’s more to the story,” I replied. “The SAP official also extended an offer to them to visit a global SAP event to be held in May 2019, wherein they would showcase their range of product and service portfolio to SEWA.” I continued, “And the icing on the cake is that they offered to do a pilot project for SEWA at no cost.”

“You mean they would work with us for free?” Masud, the chief sustainalytics officer, asked.

“Yes, absolutely free—zero cost,” I replied, smiling.

“As expected, just like you all, even Boutheina and Mariam were excited about the offer to the point that they actually came back to remind me that if we are to attend the event, then we’d better make a quick decision and accept the offer.”

“This is a true example of brand engagement. The SAP gentleman was able to hook onto the minds of our employees and hit the target home that Boutheina and Mariam actually became their brand ambassadors!” I exclaimed.

I continued, “This is the brand essence I want to inculcate in SEWA. To become a recommendable brand. Influence people’s mind—be an influencer brand.”

“Whoa, this sounds like a slippery slope,” the chief culture officer pointed out bluntly.

“Not really, it’s a bumpy and rugged road, but if maneuvered brilliantly, it can reap enormous benefits,” I replied sternly.

“Ohh,” the chief culture officer sighed.

I added, “To get there, we must jump into real life and work on real issues that might be difficult but will certainly be fun.”

As I was saying this, Boutheina, the chief branding officer requested to see me for a few moments. I signaled her to come in and join us.



BRAND WITH POTENTIAL

“By the way, I’ve a great news for you all!” I announced cheerfully.

“Whoa! Can’t wait to hear the good news. What is it, sir?” the chief greenification officer asked.

“Boutheina has been trying to reach out to Google Inc. to learn about tips to enhance SEWA’s digital presence.” I said, “We had a quick discussion last week, and I suggested that she send an email to their office explaining our pain points.”

“Aha . . . I know. I have gone through similar experiences before,” the chief flexitricity officer said and paused for a few moments to look at other’s reactions. “Last week, I was trying to reach out to a tech firm but failed to receive a reply to my emails.”

The team sighed.

He continued, “I just ended up receiving an automated notification email with some subscription links!”

Everyone rolled their eyes at him.

“Well, quite contrary to popular belief, Boutheina received both a call and an email from Google’s European head office in Dublin, Ireland,” I replied.

“Really, that’s an amazing piece of information,” the chief efficiency officer said while walking briskly towards the coffee counter.

“What did they write back?” the chief FinTech officer inquired.

“Mr. Ali Ahsan, business development consultant from the Google customer solutions department, wrote back that they identify SEWA as a brand with potential.”

“That’s awesome. ‘A brand with potential’, a real feather in our caps. This comment means a lot to us,” the chief efficienology officer exclaimed.

“There’s more,” I said.

“He further offered to help us build a custom-tailored, digital marketing strategy using Google’s AdWords platform, which includes Search, Display, Gmail, YouTube, and the Google Play store,” I continued.

“Someone, please pinch me so that I’ll know I am not daydreaming!” yelled May, the chief imagineering officer.

“Wait, let me finish,” I said as I sipped my coffee. “Furthermore, he also offered account management for any campaigns that SEWA would launch, with a dedicated account handler who will optimize and manage the campaigns for us.”

I paused for a few seconds, allowing the suspense to build up.

I smiled and said, “Now, hold onto your breath, because here comes the best part. All these services are *complimentary* if we work out a deal strategy together, based on an equal partnership.”

Everyone drew long breaths and just sat in silence.

I continued, “Can you believe your ears? Google is addressing us as a ‘brand with potential.’ I know of companies who would pay thousands of dollars to get this *comment* about their companies.”

Boutheina, the chief branding officer, commented, “We never poured money into traditional marketing. Never spent our marketing dollars on banners and hoardings.”

The team stared at her, hypnotized. No one uttered a word.

I said, “I can tell you that recommendations and word-of-mouth success don’t happen by accident. They’re the result of a deliberate strategy and consistent day-to-day—and year-to-year—execution.”

“That calls for a staggering amount of hard work and commitment to excellence,” the chief culture officer pointed out.

“By all means, yes, but don’t panic. I have an astonishing no-goof-up technique for you to cope up with the pressure,” I continued.

“Sir, may I come in?” Syeda, the chief knowledge officer asked timidly. She was carrying a few files for approval.

I nodded.

The Magic of Service

“What’s that technique sir?” Hassan, the chief flexitricity officer, inquired.

“Wait a moment! Before I share that bit of magical information with you all,” I continued while looking at Syeda, the chief knowledge officer. I said, “Here you are! Syeda, can we invite the gentleman from Google, Mr. Ali Hasan, to attend our upcoming customer service week in October?”

“Service week? What’s that?” the chief imagineering officer asked under her breath.

“Syeda, why don’t you spill the beans about the customer service week celebration?” I said while looking at her.

“Sure, with all pleasure,” she answered and then continued, “The SEWA Customer Service Week is celebrated annually during the first full week in October, in alignment with the national customer service week celebrated globally. As a matter of fact, last year, 2018, the chairman gave me a tough task to be registered on the U.S. website within less than two weeks and take this up as a project.”

“And guess what, we were able to position ourselves successfully as the only government organization from the UAE to celebrate the national customer service week for two consecutive years. In fact, the website placed our logo next to mega-conglomerates, such as IBM, Microsoft, Amazon, etc.”

“Wow,” the chief FinTech officer added, “This is a very thoughtful idea.”

Syeda smiled and continued, “It promotes the important role that customer service plays in every organization’s success and provides

a formal opportunity to thank those working on the front-lines to serve and support customers.”

She continued, “The 2019 customer service week theme is ‘The Magic of Service.’ The theme recognizes that good service is magical. It can turn an unhappy customer into a satisfied long-term customer. It can turn an occasional customer into a repeat customer. And it can turn any customer into your biggest fan and advocate.”

“It’s no wonder, sir, that you have always reminded us of the fact that happy employees keep the customers happy,” the chief design thinking officer said in excitement. “And you’ve given us the SEWA customer-centric model as well.”

This statement rang a bell to me.

I said, “I have an interesting story. Last year, in September 2018, it was 5 in the morning—after a five-hour, red-eye flight—when I arrived at the hotel where, in three hours, I would face 150 participants and deliver a keynote speech on Alleem Sustainable Development Goals. Something really bizarre happened.”

“What happened, sir?” asked Syeda, the chief knowledge officer.

“I was thrown into unexpected circumstances that reminded me to expect the unexpected,” I replied.

Everyone said in unison, “What happened?”

I smiled and replied, “The receptionist couldn’t find my reservation and didn’t seem to care. And, when I got to my room 90 minutes later, a note of greeting read, “*Hospitality and service as a way of life!*”

“Oh, what an irony!” Syeda quipped.

I replied, in a husky tone, “I shared this incident to spotlight that being customer-centric requires a culture where employees must *live* the inspirational quotes espoused on the walls. They must walk the talk.”

“Well said, sir. I couldn’t agree more,” replied Ghada, the chief greenification officer.

I put my hands on my head and looked at the ceiling.

I said, “Let me share a similar incident. This morning, Mr. Raj Agarwal, MD & CEO of GENUS Power Infrastructures & Innovation Limited, visited SEWA for the first time, and here is the news. You all will be amazed to hear to what he experienced here.”

Everyone looked at me.

I continued, “He said that on the way to SEWA, he was a little nervous and apprehensive about what our head office would look like. He had imagined it as a boring and worn out government building with sleepwalking employees who wouldn’t care enough to smile.”

“However, he was surprised to see a ‘smiley-face board’ at the entrance of our headquarters. In fact, he said that he was taken aback by such a pleasant gesture. He immediately felt relaxed and composed. In short, he felt at home.”

I paused for a moment and then said, “This is customer delight in a real sense. Do you all agree?”

The room echoed agreement.

“Now, coming back to the magical no-goof-up technique to cope up with pressure,” I said.

“Yeah, we are all ears,” the chief flexitricity officer replied.



SHOSHIN

“Are you familiar with the Japanese word *shoshin*?” I asked.

Based on the facial expressions of everyone in the room, I could see that it was a new term for them.

“I honestly don’t have a clue,” the chief design-thinking officer said.

I continued, “*Shoshin* is a word from Zen Buddhism meaning ‘beginner’s mind’; it refers to having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even when studying at an advanced level, just as a beginner would. Staying curious and open is what makes growth possible, and it requires practice to maintain that mindset. To keep learning, we have to avoid the temptation to slide into narrow and safe views of what we do. Let me quote what Tracee Ellis Ross famously said,

“I am learning every day to allow the space between where I am and where I want to be to inspire me and not terrify me.”

The team listened in silence.

I continued, “This is the reason why I had introduced my new project, golden triangle, to you all. Let’s look at the traditional project management from unconventional perspectives. It’s good—actually essential—to evolve and change our perceptions.”

“Come on now, I think, I’ve spoken enough to convince you all to think in the shoshin way. Disperse the clouds of doubts,” I said.

I paused for a moment.

“Our meeting ends here. We will catch up again next week, same day, same place, and I want you to think about my golden triangle of project management,” I announced.

Then, I looked at Ahmed Babiker, my chief culture officer and said, “As Tony Hsieh, Zappos CEO, enthusiastically points out;

“Whatever you’re thinking, think bigger.”

“I, too, want to think bigger now. I want you to send an email to the rest of the managers and employees as well, attaching the file of my project management golden triangle and seeking their views/opinions about it. And, by the way, don’t forget to send them some information about shoshin!”

Ahmed Babiker nodded in consent.

“And, yes, keep the wellspring of enthusiasm and energy going as we continue our journey onward,” I said in an exhilarated tone.

The team dispersed. They looked confident and encouraged. I saw rays of hope shining in their eyes.

I was at the crossroads of a decisive and defining moment. There was no turning back. But, I reminded myself that when the mind, body, soul, and spirit work together, anything is possible.

The week flew by in a flurry. The day of our next meeting arrived. The team had assembled in the ‘Room of Possibilities.’

Let’s find out what had happened in that room!



CHAPTER EIGHT

ROOM OF POSSIBILITIES

DATE: MAY 1, 2019

TIME: 10:10 AM

LOCATION: ROOM OF POSSIBILITIES

I gathered the team in one of our important meeting rooms: the ‘Room of Possibilities.’ It’s usually where our best ideas come to us, a room where we can allow our minds to wonder freely. Through quick talks and discussions, in this room, we go beyond the low hanging fruit that SEWA has already identified by digging down to the grassroots level of critical subjects.

Before I take you to the ‘Room of Possibilities’ and make you a part of the discussion that we had that day, I’m indebted to share with my readers a proud moment for me! As of writing this page, on May 21, 2019, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, launched the world’s first virtual ‘Ministry of Possibilities’ to incubate and develop radical solutions to the government’s most pressing problems. The ‘Ministry of Possibilities’ represents the next generation of government practices and oversees top-priority national portfolios that require quick, bold, and effective decisions by applying design-thinking and experimentation to develop proactive and disruptive solutions to tackle critical issues.

Undoubtedly, it was great news, and I was joyous about it. However, I had more than one reasons to be happy. In 2018, almost a year before the formation of the ‘Ministry of Possibilities,’ I had renamed one of the SEWA offices to the ‘Room of Possibilities.’ I was overwhelmed to see my country in tandem with my thoughts and philosophies. It gave me a great sense of fulfillment.

Now, let’s get back to the meeting day.

So, the team members had settled into their chairs. The chief engineering officer was her usual self—excited and gregarious! The rest of the team appeared in somber spirits, except for the chief FinTech officer and chief greenification officer, who were engrossed in a tête-à-tête.

I entered the room and said in a cheerful tone, “Our theme is to simplify SEWA’s project management and mitigate risks. So, how do we get started?”

The chief culture officer said, “Sir, if you would, please allow me to say something.”

I nodded my head and signalled him to proceed.

“As instructed by you, I forwarded the email to everyone, starting with front-line managers, supervisors, team leaders, and the rest of the SEWA family introducing your project golden triangle,” he said.

“Well done,” I said.

“Well, do you want to know the opinions and feedback I received?” he asked.

“Why not? I would like to hear what they have to say,” I replied.

“It didn’t go down well with some of the managers and the majority, I’m sorry to say; some made jokes out of it!” he replied. “It seems few of our managers and most of our people didn’t welcome the idea,” he responded anxiously.

“Look, rejection is hard, but to get acceptance you have to put up with a lot of rejection,” I said in a reassuring tone. “Get ready for skinned knees and elbows. You can’t be the kid standing at the top of the waterslide, overthinking it. You have to go down the chute.”

Everyone nodded their heads.

I smiled and added, “Don’t worry, the idea will soon be accepted and implemented. Don’t lose hope. We need to work as a unified team, willing to push back on each other to get results.”

I sipped my morning coffee reflectively and asked the team a question that had been nagging me since I had talked about the golden triangle.

“Has any one of you watched the King Kong movie? Do you remember the iconic climax of the movie?” I asked the team.

The chief efficienology officer said, “I do. Wow, that was long time back. I was a kid. No one can forget the nerve racking action moments of King Kong clinging to the highest tower in the town and swatting at airplanes like flies they flew around him!”

“Does anyone know the name of that highest tower?” I asked.

“I know it. It is located in New York City, isn’t it?” the chief culture officer asked.

“Yes,” I replied, “but can you name the building?”

“I know it; it is the Empire State Building,” the chief SHEngineering answered.

I said, “Well, then, let me tell you an interesting story about that gigantic tower that King Kong immortalized—yes, it’s the Empire State Building in New York City. The tower is a successful example of project management history. Perhaps most important of all, once you understand how they did what they did, you can follow in their footsteps and achieve the extraordinary in your project management.”

The Empire State Building

I continued, “For individuals of this generation, mention of the Empire State Building may evoke the image of Ray Harryhausen’s (movie director) animated giant, King Kong, clinging to the needle at its summit and swatting hapless biplanes out of the air, with Fay Wray (movie actress) alternately screaming and fainting at his feet. The fact that the movie was released less than two years after the completion of the building is suggestive of how rapidly the edifice became regarded

as an icon of world architecture. More remarkable, still, is the speed at which it was completed!”

The team was listening with full attention.

Looking at the excitement on their faces, I continued, “According to *projectmanagmenthistory.com*, construction of the Empire State Building began on St. Patrick’s Day, March 17, 1930. One year and 45 days later, on May 1, 1931, it was officially opened. At 1,454 feet, with 102 stories and 1.2 million square feet of rentable space, the building has been honored by the American Society of Civil Engineers as one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World. The fact that it was completed in approximately seven million man-hours represents a major evolutionary shift. The building was constructed in ways that differed from conventional projects of the time.”

“Very interesting, very interesting. A real good case study,” the chief efficienology officer said.

An Adaptive, Iterative Approach

I smiled, and said, “The Empire State Inc. investors realized that it would be necessary to discard the custom of transferring control of the project’s design to architects. The project leaders admitted that the project demanded ability, experience, and organization beyond the scope of a single professional unit and would, if undertaken by the architect’s office, involve a duplication of effort and loss of time too expensive to be tolerated in an operation requiring large capital investment.”

“What did they do then?” the chief greenification officer asked.

I continued, “They committed to an adaptive, iterative approach, in which efficiency of practice was facilitated through ongoing inter-communication between working groups, enabling the elimination of waste in relation to materials, work structure, and man hours.”

“That’s mind-blowing!” the chief imagineering officer said in an excited tone. “Unbelievable.”

I said, “Wait, there’s more to it. It is interesting to reflect that the approach adopted on the Empire State Building project contributed

to the rejuvenation of Japanese industry in the aftermath of World War II. The Japanese industry introduced project management concepts learned indirectly from the Empire State Building project. The positive consequences of these ideas is most conspicuously evinced in the rise to prominence of the Toyota auto company.”

May, the chief imagineering officer said, “Toyota’s commitment to ongoing improvement—Kaizen—was based on a determination to reduce ‘waste’ from the manufacturing process, wasn’t it?”

I smiled and said, “That’s right. There’s not an iota of doubt that the Empire State Building project succeeded through the innovation of envisioning and designing the project as a short-term self-regulating manufacturing process, evolving organically and dynamically—kaizen like—to meet the requirements of value and scheduling.”

The chief SHEngineering officer said, “Sir, we are convinced that in this new and challenging era, there’s very little room for error. But, I can only imagine how difficult it’s going to be.”

“Sir, just because a technique was employed last month or last year doesn’t mean it applies today. Every team and project is different, and there are often good reasons to question old judgments,” she continued.

I replied, “Yes, I see your point of view, but the reason that I want you all to think unconventionally is to figure out the *unnecessary* practices of managing projects because the unnecessary ones tend to snowball, dragging teams down into the tar pit of difficult situations. Since 80% of cost and schedule overruns are usually due to the last 10–20% of requested functionality.”

I continued, “When processes are required to manage processes, it’s hard to know where the actual work is being done.”

Deep down, I told myself, *If I’m focused on, committed to, excited about, and capable of succeeding, the odds increase that everyone else will behave the same way.*

What is it that I seek now? I asked myself.

A voice came from within, and I said, “You want your employees to change. You seek a paradigm shift in their old-school thoughts.”

I know change is a process, not an event. It will take some time. I'm never in favor of shortcuts, I said to myself while still caught in my lukewarm thoughts.

Suddenly, I looked out of the window, and as far as the eye can see, I could see crystal-clear blue sky. Suddenly, I spotted the tip of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest skyscraper in the world, an epitome of commitment, passion, and larger-than-life vision. With a total height of 2,722 ft, Burj Khalifa is synonymous to a living wonder. Undoubtedly, it's a stunning work of art and an incomparable feat of engineering. More than just the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa is an unprecedented example of international cooperation, a symbolic beacon of progress, and an emblem of the new, dynamic, and prosperous Middle East.

I felt very proud.

I began, "Dear team, I completely understand your dilemma."

I continued in a reassuring tone, "Don't worry. I won't let you enter the battle ground full-throttle all by yourselves." I said, looking at their perplexed faces, "To boost our chances of a successful transformation, we have to take the right actions."

"But, how? Do you have a magic wand?" quipped Masud, the chief sustainability officer.

"A secret victory weapon?" asked Ahmed Babiker, the chief culture officer.

I laughed and said, "I have an interesting formula that will help us navigate the travesty."

The team looked at me, admiring my Eureka moment.



STAY EAGER

“I’ll be back in the bat of an eye,” I said while looking at the team.

“Sir, where are you heading to?” the chief culture officer asked hesitatingly.

“To my ‘state of mind’ corner in my office. But, this time it’s not for a quick mindfulness exercise; rather, it’s to grab one of my favorite books from the crowded shelf of my library next to my ‘state of mind’ corner,” I said with a smile.

“Let’s bring it on!” The chief efficienology officer said in an enthusiastic tone.

I said to myself, *I haven’t laid eyes on that book in weeks, so good luck finding it in my office!*

I entered the office with enthusiasm and went straight to my library. This library is special for multiple reasons. It consists of books that have served as my references in writing *The SEWA Series* compendium, namely, *The SEWA Way*, *The SEWA Brand Turnaround & Rejuvenation*, *The SEWA Customer-centric Model*, *The SEWA Marketing Plan*, and *The SEWA Brand Leadership*. The books in this library have a lot in common, apart from the wisdom they hold; all have dog-eared pages, highlighted text, and sticky notes decorating the edges of the books.

With a quick look at the shelves, I was able to spot the book for which I was searching.

“Aha, there you are! Perched comfortably at the top shelf,” I murmured. “Come, it’s time to unravel the secrets you store.”

“Got it!” I said aloud as I entered the room. I could see their eyes following the book, as I held the book down at the desk.

The team looked at me. I could sense exhilaration in the air. They looked ecstatic and thrilled. They saw me and began to clap fervently.

“What happened? What’s the reason behind your change in mood?” I asked.

May, the chief imagineering officer, stood up to speak. Her eyes were almost filled with tears. She said, “Major Hazza Al Mansoori, the UAE’s first astronaut, landed safely back in the UAE.”

“That’s incredible news!” I said out enthusiastically.

Keeping the book on the meeting desk, I moved towards the TV shelf and picked up the remote control.

“Let’s witness this memorable event live!” I said. I tuned into our national channel, and we saw the historical event live on television.

Major Hazza Al Mansoori was received by HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, at the Presidential Airport in Abu Dhabi. Hazza was joined by backup astronaut Dr. Sultan Al Neyadi, and the pair were given a hero’s welcome when they landed at the Presidential Terminal at Abu Dhabi International Airport on a Presidential Flight at 4.40 p.m.

Emerging from the presidential aircraft, Hazza waved to the awaiting crowd from the top of the stairs, wearing the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC) blue space suit and draped in a UAE flag. Upon his descent, he was met by the Crown Prince, and the two exchanged greetings.

“Wow, it’s such a heart-warming, historic day,” the chief efficiency officer said.

Everyone was glued to the TV screen.

Astronaut Al Mansoori then presented the Crown Prince with the flag of the UAE, which he took along with him on his journey to the International Space Station.

The Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces was accompanied by his grandchildren, other ministers, and more than 100 school children to welcome the astronaut back home.

Then, we saw Astronaut Hazza Al proceeding towards media personnel to deliver his press release.

The team looked up and quickly tensed their body language.

“Indeed, it’s a proud moment for our country,” I said with a great sense of pride. “The future is in the hands of the youth.”

The room was vibrating in the spirit of nationhood.

“Sir, I see that you found the book that you were looking for,” said May, the chief imagineering officer.

“What is the name of the book?” asked Ghada, the chief greenification officer.

“It’s called, *The Key MBA Models* by Julian Birkinshaw and Ken Mark,” I said. “This is a collection of 60+ models used in the lexicon of management.”

The chief knowledge officer wanted to be the first to lay her hands on the book. Picking up the book, she glanced through it quickly, sifting through the dog-eared pages.

She asked, “There’s no doubt that this book is a compilation of groundbreaking management models, but how does it affect our ball-game?”

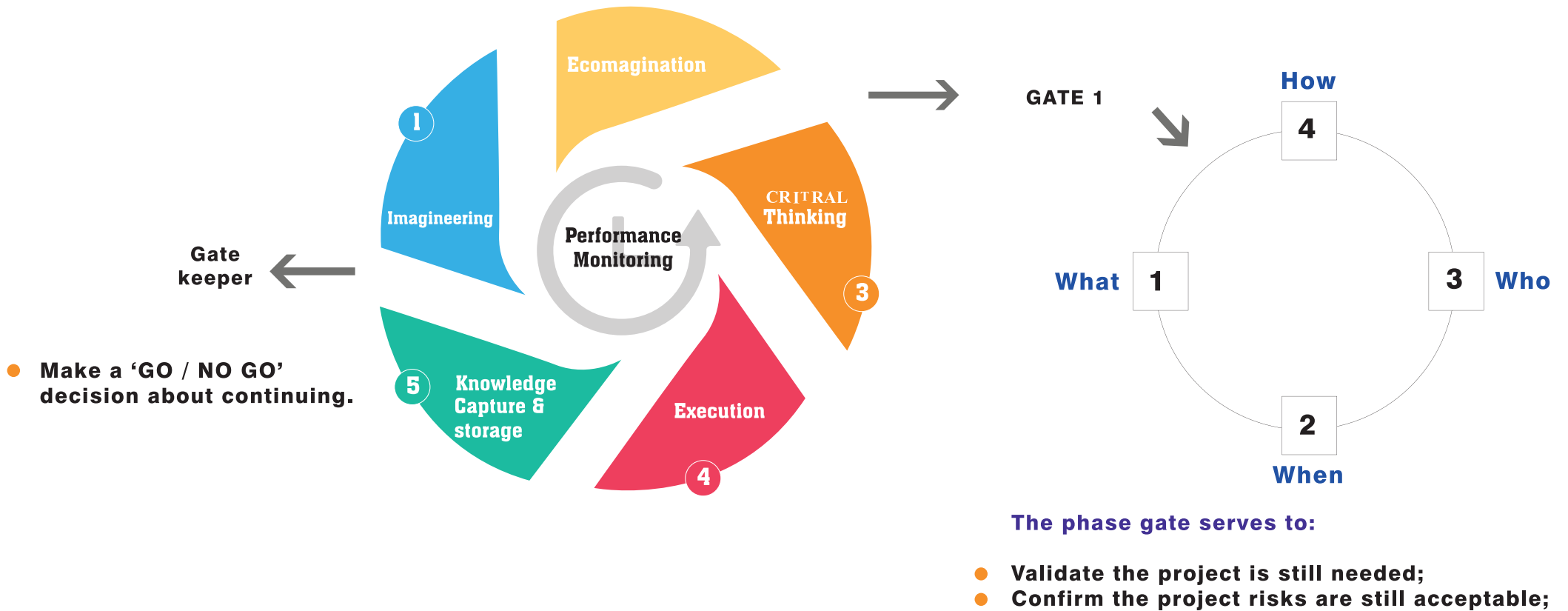
“You will find that out soon,” I replied with a bright smile.

“Dear team, it’s not a self-help or a get-rich-quick book that delivers blinkered storytelling,” I answered.

“Have a look at this; *Change Management: Kotter’s Eight-Step Model*’ is the first chapter of the book,” I said while showing the first chapter of the book to the team.

A team member asked, “Sir, do you mean that we need to resort to change management practices?” After a moment, the chief greenification officer asked, “Re-engineering times?”

I said, “You got it! Change management is a permanent part of the leadership landscape. It never goes away. We need to shatter old-school thoughts and break free from the shackles of thinking ‘but this is the way we’ve always done it.’ We are living in challenging times. Today’s landscape is treacherous and constantly shifting, causing us to be available 24/7 and 365.”



SEWA Project Management Model

I could sense that the team was listening to me.

I added, “Which inevitably leads us to take bigger risks and urges us to take a stroll on thin ice.”

“I couldn’t agree more, sir; many organizations fumble while implementing change,” the chief knowledge officer opined.

“That’s why it pays to listen to John Kotter, founder of Kotter International and a well-known thought leader in the fields of business, leadership, and change,” I said. “Kotter’s eight-step model is probably the most well-regarded in the change management arena.”

“Sounds interesting!” Moza, the chief restructuring officer quipped.

“Why don’t you read the eight-steps aloud?” I asked the chief restructuring officer, handing the book to her.

As things began to improve, my aspirations increased.



IMPLEMENT A CHANGE PROGRAM

Moza adjusted her eyeglasses, which were perched on her nose, cleared her throat, and read the following steps:

Step 1: Establish a sense of urgency.

Step 2: Form a powerful coalition.

Step 3: Create a vision for change.

She stopped and looked around. I nodded and smiled at her. The rest of the team were also listening to her quietly.

She continued to read.

Step 4: Communicate the vision.

The chief greenification officer blurted out, “Wait a moment. This step reminds me of a beautiful excerpt from John C. Maxwell’s book, *Good Leaders Ask Great Questions*. Here it goes;

The word communication comes from the Latin word *communis*, meaning “common.” Before we can communicate we must establish commonality. The greater the commonality, the greater the potential for connection and communication . . . People are open to those who are open to them.

“Wow, Ghada, thanks for sharing this. This is a delightful piece of information,” Moza said.

“Yes, we all need to keep this in mind. Definitely, we’ll be great communicators,” added Fatima, the chief SHEngineering officer.

Moza breathed a big huff and said, “Thanks, ladies. Shall we move on to step 5?”

“Yes, sure,” they replied.

Step 5: Remove obstacles.

Step 6: Create short-term wins.

Step 7: Build on change.

She stopped for a moment and said, “Ahmed Babiker will like step eight.”

He looked at her with a smile.

She said, “Step 8: Anchor the changes in corporate culture.”

He clapped and gave her a big smile.

“Thank you,” I said. “This is a genius weapon. There’s not an iota of doubt that if implemented in the right order, these steps can do wonders. Don’t you guys think so?” I asked.

“Company culture is deceptive,” the chief culture officer added. “Culture isn’t about the weekly happy hours or holding hands around a campfire. Neither is culture a byproduct of team activities and team lunches.”

“What do you mean, Ahmed Babiker?” I asked.

“Sir, allow me to explain further, with the help of a story.” He continued, “In 1997, Enron sent out a regular shareholder letter. On the first page of the letter, Enron listed its core values. Number one was ‘integrity.’ The company even had it carved into the marble at its headquarters building.”

Everyone was listening to him.

He continued, “Values only matter if you live them on a daily basis. You must be willing to hire and fire by them. You need to be willing to make tough decisions. It’s not okay to have a star performer, our best sales guy or our best engineer, who doesn’t adhere to our values. That’s like what Enron did. There can be no exceptions.”

I smiled at him and said, “Bravo! You are on point, Ahmed Babiker. At a company, values only matter if you actually do something with them. I like what Flavio Martins wrote in his book titled *Win the Customer: 70 Simple Rules for Sensational Service*, about Google’s corporate culture:

It’s really the people that make Google the kind of company it is. We hire people who are smart and determined, and we favor ability over experience. Although Googlers share common goals and visions for the company, we hail from all walks of life and speak dozens of languages, reflecting the global audience that we serve.

“I feel the eight-steps of Kotter change management is pretty basic, simple, and easy to implement,” the chief imagineering officer pointed out.

I replied, “As former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, once said in an interview,

“You would not believe how difficult it is to be
simple and clear.
People are afraid that they may be seen a simpleton.
In reality, just the opposite is true.”

“I think these eight-steps will nudge even the *resistive* ones—the ones who don’t buy-into new ideas easily,” the chief SHEngineering officer affirmed.

“Yes, I agree with you, Fatima. This model boils down to people—it’s about people,” the chief efficienology officer added.

The chief FinTech officer said, “In fact, the very reason that we’ve gathered here today—in the form of a strong high-performance team—and are having an honest dialogue/discussion indicates that we’re already applying change management. Isn’t it?”

“That’s step 1, create a sense of urgency, and step 2, form a powerful coalition,” the chief sustainalytics officer said enthusiastically while flipping through the pages of the book.

She continued, “And we should also count step 5, remove obstacles. Aren’t we here to identify and remove roadblocks/obstacles to successful projects?”

“Hold on a second.” The chief knowledge officer chimed in. “Remember the old adage,

“Don’t put the cart before the horse.”

“What do you mean?” the chief imagineering officer inquired.

Syeda replied eloquently, “Don’t do things out of the proper order. The horse pulls the cart, the cart doesn’t pull the horse.”

She continued, “Just to remind you all, Kotter’s eight-step model is not a jump-start process—it’s a ‘prescription’ process. There is a big difference.”

The team rolled their eyes, but I knew that the chief knowledge officer can pull it off with panache.

“What is a ‘prescription’ process?” asked Jose, the chief FinTech officer.

Jose is known for his stolid, phlegmatic, and unemotional nature.

The chief knowledge officer jumped in and said, “Sir, I’d like to answer this question, with your permission.”

“Go ahead,” I replied.

She continued, “A prescription process means we must follow the order of Kotter’s eight-step model religiously, the way we follow a prescription handed to us by our physician.”

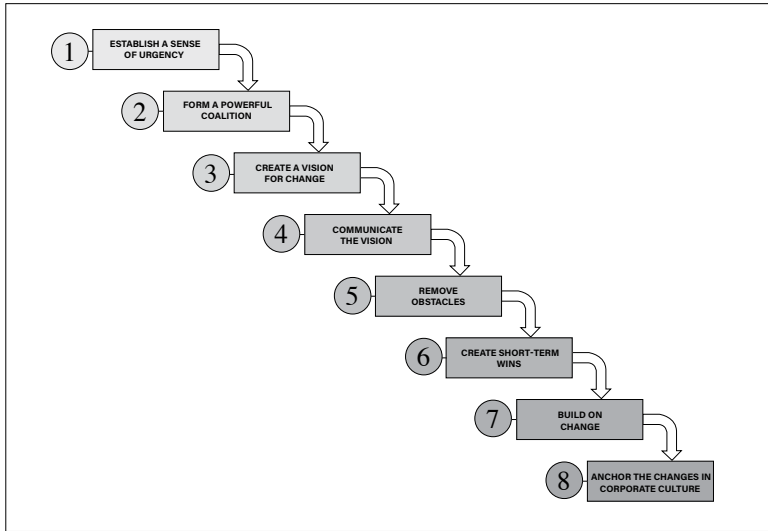
She added, “Now tell me, has anyone ever mixed up the dosage mentioned on the prescription?”

“No way, we can’t. The wrong dose can worsen the ailment,” replied the chief culture officer, throwing his hands in the air.

“Spot-on!” she replied. “We need to play safe with the eight-step model. A quick look at the steps shows that it works on a *waterfall* mode. The outcome of the previous step cascades over to the next step.”

“The prescription process and waterfall model. How nice to be introduced to new knowledge,” the chief flexitricity officer murmured.

“Can I have your attention? Please look at the smart screen and the infographic it contains,” I said.



The chief imagineering officer added, “Yes, we use this lexicon in project management practices. In a waterfall model, each phase must be completed before the next phase can begin, and there is no overlapping of the phases.”

“Bingo. You covered it all,” the chief knowledge officer replied enthusiastically.

“Kudos. The challenge, however, is not just to become aware of or practice these steps occasionally; rather, it’s to make them a habit or, what I love to call, automatic behaviors,” I said, looking at both ladies.

“Thank you, sir,” everyone replied.

My eyes widened.



THE SEWA PROJECT MANAGEMENT MODEL

Creating a Project Model that Works

I thought, *As a leader, my role is all about engaging with employees at an emotional level. They have to see the change; they have to feel the change. They have to be the change agents! Yet, the killer questions are how does this model translate to the frontline, and how do we make it operational? And quickly!*

“Team, I have a genius weapon to aid your project journey. I have devised a project management model based on SEWA’s principles, cultural core values, and my experience with project leadership. The presentation will help prepare you and others on your team for long-term success.”

“That’s music to our ears,” the chief efficiency officer quipped.

“Prepare yourselves, for I will now present some profound material. Here you go, then. The image will speak for itself. Have a deep look. Create a visual representation of it in your mind, and then experience it. The effect can be nothing short of transformational.”

“We are all excited to see the full model,” the chief greenification officer said.

I replied, “They say an elephant never forgets. Well, you are not elephant. Take notes constantly and save interesting thoughts. And, remember the old adage,

“An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.”

The rest of this chapter gives a quick overview of each of our SEWA project management steps, and the remainder of the book describes them in greater detail.

“Ready? Let’s get started!” I said while showing them the SEWA project management model image on the smart screen.

The room filled with excitement.

I announced, “By now, your mind must have explored the dynamics of the model. Remember, my goal is to encourage you to achieve breakthrough results, *not* dictate to you how to achieve them. So, I urge you to give them a fair hearing.”

The team had begun to grasp the full spectrum of the colorful image in front of them on the screen.

Their gleaming eyes evinced that they loved the SEWA project management model.

The chief FinTech officer asked, “I am a hard-nosed, realistic, profit-minded manager. As they say, great results speak infinitely louder than perfect ideas. So, more than the process, I am interested in financial results. Could you elaborate more on what you are saying?”

We could sense the puffed up pride in his voice.

He continued, “So, let’s come straight to the bottom-line: money.”

He stopped for a moment and then continued, asking, “What is the success rate of this model? And how soon could we see plausible, tangible outcomes?”

“I guess. It’s a project model and not a profit model,” the chief flexitricity officer quipped with a laugh.

The chief FinTech officer shrugged his answer.

I replied, “W. Edwards Deming, the management and quality guru, said it best when he told executives,

“Managing a company by looking at financial data is the equivalent of driving a car by looking in the rearview mirror.”

I smiled and continued, “No matter what your mission is, have some notion in your head. Forget the model, whether it’s no-profit or profit. Ask yourself the more important question: Is my project

improving performance? Are we sure about it? Seek to answer these questions all the time. And, if your answer is no, change your mission.”

The chief FinTech officer smiled and replied, “All of us profit from being corrected!” He continued, “Thank you for changing my perception towards managing projects.”

The team giggled.

I said, “You are most welcome, Jose. Here’s another piece of advice, next time your mind sways toward profit, remind yourself of the lovely quote by James Rouse:

“Profit is not the legitimate purpose of business. The legitimate purpose of business is to provide a product or service that people need and do it so well that it’s profitable.”

The team sat spell-bound and listened to me.

The chief imagineering officer said curiously, “I wonder, if it’s too good to be true.” She continued, “I have heard you speaking very highly about this model in your Alleem Business Congress events. Since then, the model has fascinated me, and I have wanted to know more about it.”

She said in an excited tone, “I can’t believe that today, I am going to learn about this model from the master himself.”

I replied, “Well, I have used this proven model to deal with projects, big or small, but we can get to that later. Let’s begin with the basics.”

I looked around the room and said, “Let’s move on to explore the marvellous model further through my eyes.”

The team members nodded their heads in agreement.

I got to my feet and began to walk around the room. “Take a look at this, and keep this as your screen saver to remind you,” I said.

I clicked the pointer and read the highlighted text in one breath.

The SEWA project management model consists of five stages, with stage-gate reviews between each stage, and performance monitoring encircling the model from the start to the end.

“I want you all to take a screenshot of this project management model so that you can read and reread what I just said out loud, until being a project leader becomes second nature to you in your project roles at work, in your home, and in the community,” I said with a grin.

“Well, the meeting is getting interesting,” the chief design-thinking officer announced.

“It’s really quite easy,” I said with a smile.

“Absolutely,” said the chief greenification officer. “But, before talking about my thoughts on the project management model, let me ask you a question. May I?”

“Ask away,” I said.

“How would you measure the success of each stage of your model?” she asked.

“Each stage is different, and each has its own success criteria,” I replied, “So, all five stages should to be handled in uniquely different ways.”

“Sounds so interesting!” she exclaimed.

The chief knowledge officer interrupted and said in an excited tone, “There’s a saying we use around here that says it all:

“Different strokes for different folks.”

“Well said, Syeda,” I added, “How about moving on to the next slide . . . hmm, look! Coincidentally, it explains the performance monitoring bit.”

With that, I turned to my laptop, showed the slide that read ‘performance monitoring,’ and turned to my project leadership team.

Read on to enjoy the interesting conversation that we are starting very soon. Go get yourself a cup of coffee. You won’t regret it.



PERFORMANCE MONITORING

I began by saying, “Welcome aboard. Here is the first part of the presentation; it’s about Performance Monitoring. I want you to remember what Lao-Tzu once said,

“If you wish to be out front,
then act as if you were behind.”

I said, “Performance monitoring is an ongoing process at the heart of the SEWA project management model. This starts at the inception of the project and continues throughout the model’s stages. It encompasses both the control and follow-up of a project in relation to function, time, and cost, as well as stakeholders’ perception of the project.”

In a nondescript black suit, white shirt, and red tie, with an IPAD in hand, engineer Hassan, the chief flexitricity officer, was looking around at each of the team members. As the team browsed the paper in front of them, he browsed them. His gaze roamed like a spotlight.

He winked at me and said, “I guess, data is the key here.” His answer was as inviting as the whiff of morning coffee.

I smiled and replied, “Let me remind you of W. Edwards Deming’s famous quote,

“Without data, you are just another person
with an opinion.”

The chief FinTech officer exclaimed, “Data matters enormously, but sometimes, we spend so much time trying to make sense of the data and debating whether it is right that we never get around to exploring what it means to the business.”

He is keenly aware of the problem, I thought.

I replied, “My objective, here, is to spotlight the little-noticed and underappreciated activities that entail performance monitoring—say, generating reports.”

The chief flexitricity officer said, “We generate dozens of reports every year for several projects.” He continued, “We’ve stitched together our performance monitoring on blood, sweat, and Excel spreadsheets. It’s a nightmare!”

“Too often, however, we try to address the issue as if it were mainly a software issue. Absolutely not,” the chief sustainalytics officer said.

I could sense that things were beginning to spiral out of control. I wanted to communicate thoughts and ideas effectively, in a way that connected with my people and moved them to take action.

I cleared my throat and said, “Well, there is a sea of difference in quantitative data and qualitative data. We need *both* for performance monitoring. And,” I continued, “in my opinion, a project’s health depends heavily on qualitative data, for example, the team’s morale or feelings about the status or difficulty of a given task. This must also be collected.”

The team looked exasperated.

Afra, our chief efficienology officer, added, “That would require going line-by-line through the project plan—taking every last nuance and pushing it to an even higher level of operational proficiency.”

Ahmed Babiker, our chief culture officer, added, “Not to forget that we must ensure that every bit of the project is grounded at the highest level of ethics and integrity.”

I smiled, and said, “Bravo team. I am impressed with your level of understanding.”

The chief imagineering officer waved her hand and said, “Dear team, I’ve been involved in SEWA projects for quite some time. I can vouch for the fact that there are colossal challenges in managing projects. There were times when I was at my wit’s end!”

The room listened to her in silence.

She looked around the room and continued, “Deliverables must be completed according to a schedule, which is usually aggressive, and within a budget, which is usually fixed.”

She paused to catch some breath.

She began again, “That’s only the tip of the iceberg. In dire straits, we’ve suffered *scope creep* in most cases.”

“Whoa,” the team echoed.

The chief greenification officer inquired, “Thanks, May, for sharing the complications. But, can you tell us more about the term ‘scope creep’ and how can we prevent it? I am an expert, but I know only of *creeper* plants that grow in my garden!”

All of us laughed.

May replied, “In project management, scope creep refers to changes and continuous or uncontrolled growth in a project’s scope at any point after the project begins.”

I decided to add something to the conversation, “Voila! There you are. Bang on! May, thank you very much for bringing this up. Nothing but ‘performance monitoring’ helps to prevent scope creep.”

I continued, “And performance monitoring ensures that the project accomplishes what it sets out to do on time and within the allotted budget. This allows us to make the necessary adjustments regarding resource and budget allocation. Furthermore, it clarifies any comparisons made between our original plan and current progress.”

The team listened to me in awe.

“But, don’t fret, performance monitoring is not rocket science. Just keep a few important tools handy, and you’ll come out with flying colors,” I said.

“That’s great news for all of us. Please share the tools with us. We’ll take a note of it,” the chief flexitricity officer responded while lifting his pen to jot down notes on his writing pad.



THE SECRET

I moved on to the next slide.

The slide read: “Task Management.”

The chief sustanalytics officer said in excitement, “Wow, it’s just one single tool. I had thought that you would bring to us a long list of every possible tool that exists.”

“Couldn’t agree more. I had the same feelings,” the chief FinTech officer added, nodding his head.

I grinned and replied in a comforting tone, “Projects are made up of tasks, and knowing how to manage your tasks (and everyone else’s) is the *secret* to getting your projects completed on time. At its simplest, task management is having a ‘to-do list,’ but you’ll soon find that that method isn’t going to cut it for managing project workloads.”

I paused to check their reaction. They looked cool, calm, and collected.

I added, “And, yes, don’t be tricked by this slide. I do have more tools to share, but I will reveal them one at a time, when needed.”

“So, before I delve deep into task management, let me ask you a simple question: ‘Why manage tasks?’”

“We can’t be efficient if all we do is react to whoever shouts the loudest at work. We can’t be efficient purely by answering the next email in our inbox,” the chief culture officer replied promptly.

I said, “I agree. We have to manage our tasks as a group in a lean way and manage our time to spend the right amount of time working on the priority tasks. And, that means staying off social media until the work is done.”

I continued, “Task management is a way of describing how we identify, monitor, and progress the work that we need to do during the project.”

“Do you mean task management keeps us on top of all our work and helps our team hit their deadlines?” the chief sustainalytics officer asked.

I replied, “Of course, and above all, we can keep a *balanced* workload so that we can adjust or delegate tasks and deadlines so that none of us are overworked.”

“That’s music to our ears,” the chief FinTech officer said with a smile.



GO/NO-GO DECISIONS

“Sir, you’ve explained the importance of performance monitoring quite explicitly. And, we are in complete tandem with your thoughts,” the chief sustainability officer said.

He continued, “However, how should we decide when to begin the next project phase?”

Moza, the chief restructuring officer added, “Or, how to accept, reject, or redirect the project?”

I clicked on the pointer to move to the next slide and replied with a smile, “To make my job easier, when deciding whether to accept or reject a project, I consider the following critical questions:

- Does the project present a sound commercial argument? (Let’s weigh the pros and cons.)
- What are the risks involved? (Let’s evaluate the risks.)”

“This is splendid. Thanks for sharing this valuable information,” the chief imagineering officer responded with awe.

She continued, “Do we also conduct stage-gate reviews here?”

The chief culture officer interrupted, “Wait a moment team. Go slow. I am not familiar with these technical jargons. I will need some time to wrap my head around them.”

“What is stage-gate or tollgate review? Do they mean the same thing? And, why do we need them?” the chief FinTech officer asked while raising his hand.

I paused and then replied, “Yes, stage-gate and tollgate are the same thing. The question was, ‘why perform stage-gate/tollgate reviews?’ My answer has always been logical and simple; the project phases are connected by *virtual* stage-gates. These gates are used so that the business/organization plans and executes projects in *discrete* phases.”

“That’s quite interesting. I am amused,” Moza said. “However, do we really need them for specific purposes?”

I looked at May, the chief imagineering officer, and signalled her to answer.

She grabbed a marker and, moving towards the whiteboard, replied, “Let me shed some light here. At the completion of each stage, before we transition to the next stage, the stage-gate review serves the following purposes:

- Validate the project’s relevance.
- Confirm the acceptance of project risks.
- Help stakeholders assess the plan, options, and risks.
- Make a ‘go/no-go’ decision about continuing to the next stage.
- Approve, redirect, or cancel the project.”

She wrote these bullet points on the whiteboard.

Stage-Gate Keeper

“This looks like a lot of work. Must need someone tough to carry it out,” the chief efficienology officer said.

May replied, “You are right. That’s the reason we have stage-gate keepers.”

“Who are they, and what is their role?” the chief culture officer inquired.

I said, “Bingo! Good question, and here is the answer. At each stage-gate review, the continuation of a project is decided by a stage-gate keeper (typically, a team member working on the project) who is skilled and has the appropriate knowledge and expertise. At each stage, you’ll want to know whether it is still viable.”

“Isn’t he the project manager?” the chief flexitricity officer asked.

“He or she is not necessarily the project manager,” I replied. “The stage-gate keeper answers the following questions:

- What technical/non-technical work needs to be done at each stage?
- When are the deliverables to be generated at each stage?
- Who is involved at each stage?
- How to control and approve each phase?

If the emerging evidence says to move on—move on!”

“That’s cool!” the chief knowledge officer exclaimed.

I continued, “His or her decision is based on the information available at the time, after analyzing the business case, and on the risks involved and the availability of necessary resources (e.g., budget, other resources, and competent staff).”

I added, “Don’t think his job is easy. His questioning is systematic, disciplined, and deep and usually focused on issues and problems. In short, he digs beneath the surface of the issues.”

“The stage-gate keeper as flashing his beefed-up muscle like an invincible Sumo wrestler. He makes it a point that to get a green signal, the project team has to defeat him by answering his questions. Looking at him, the team wish they had *Aladdin’s genie* to answer the questions and defeat the sumo wrestler-like stage-gate keeper. The following four challenging questions are asked of the team by the stage-gate keeper.”

1. Have you incorporated lean management into your process? If yes, then how?
 2. How did you intend to incorporate value engineering?
 3. What about systems thinking? Did you consider the big picture?
 4. Which principles of target value design would you implement?
- The chief SHEngineering officer said, “Whoa, these are tough nuts to crack.”

“Yes, but they are imperative and crucial. No worries; the technical jargon is explained in the upcoming slides,” I replied.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Now, let’s get back to the model. Are you guys ready?” I asked.

They answered, “Yes, surely.”



IMAGINEERING

I was feeling like a runner about to run an important race— every muscle taut, totally concentrated on the race ahead.

“Let me remind you all of our SEWA project management model. It consists of the five performing stages. Please pay attention to the screen,” I said, looking at my project team.

“The SEWA project management model comprises five stages,” I said while pointing at the screen.

1. Imagineering
2. Ecomagination
3. CRITICAL thinking
4. Execution
5. Knowledge capture and storage

“Each stage contains tasks and the knowledge and skills that are required to competently perform these tasks,” I said. “Now, let me start with stage 1.” I clicked my pointer to next slide.

It read “Imagineering.”

“Whoa, more new creative jargon!” the chief culture officer was quick to point out.

“Well, definitely a creative term, but not a new term,” I answered. I continued, “The term has been around for quite some time now.”

“What does it mean?” the chief greenification officer asked.

“You’ll be amused to know that imagineering is an old technique that has been used by numerous big corporations around the world,

with Disney being one of the most famous examples, in its combination of the words *imagination* and *engineering*,” I said.

“*Imagineering* means the implementation of creative ideas into practical forms. In other words, imagineering is letting your imagination soar and then engineering it back down to Earth,” I continued.

I could feel the engagement of my team.

“Let’s get back to business. In PowerPoint presentations, all projects can be made to look simple and easy to manage, when in reality the situation is much more complex. Failure to see those complexities leads to the *underestimation* of schedule and budget, plus a host of other ailments. In my view, any project is created twice. The first creation is the *mental* creation, while the second is the *physical* creation. The Imagineering process enables us to visualize both creations and witness success,” I said.

“I totally agree with you, sir,” Masud, the chief sustainability officer said.

“Let’s talk about each one separately,” I said.

Visualization

“Listen. SEWA embeds the principle of “learning before, during, and after” in each and every program and project’s life cycle. Most humans are visual creatures, anyway. Visualization is the ability to see the *mental* creation of the project. Visualizing allows the SEWA project team to understand the scheduling situation so that they can react or respond within a short period of time, according to whether the input conditions change or not. Thus, visualizing helps managers make difficult decisions, even in unstructured environments,” I said.

“Thank you, sir, very clear now.” Masud said.

I cleared my throat and said, “Project management is an everevolving discipline. A lot has changed since the time I did a crash course on project management at the Stephen Covey Institute back in the early 2000s. At the time, I had just been promoted to an executive role, but my interest in project management pushed me to take up that crash course.”

“Wow. We admire your unrelenting quest of knowledge,” Hassan, the chief flexitricity officer said.

I replied, “Remember the wonderful advice,

“Leap—and the net will appear.”

I continued, “project management still interests me, and I keep myself updated by reading most of the latest discoveries in this field. One such new tool that impressed me was ‘The CUSP-Tool,’ which is a *premortem* tool introduced by Gary Klein. I have summarized the tool in the next slide.”

In a project premortem, prior to the project launch, the project team imagines the project has *failed* and brainstorms all of the reasons that could lead to this failure. The team then develops plans to mitigate these reasons for failure. After that, the team has an intensive discussion about the pitfalls.

I continued, “At SEWA, we need to adapt the CUSP-Tool.”

Hassan inquired, “What does that stand for, sir? And what does that mean?”

I replied, “The Comprehensive Unit-based Safety Program (CUSP) is a method that can help this project team make projects *safer* by combining improved teamwork, best practices, and the science of safety. The tool is expected to reap enormous benefits. Moreover, it can pave our way towards the ‘initiation’ phase of SEWA projects.”

“Hmm, interesting,” a few of the team members hummed.

Initiation

I said, “Now let me take you to the initiation phase, which takes place at the beginning of any project. In this phase, the idea for the project is explored and elaborated. The goal of this phase is to examine the feasibility of the project. In addition, decisions are made concerning who is assigned to carry out the project, which party (or parties) will

be involved, and whether the project will have an adequate base of support among those involved.”

“At this time, I feel the need for a tried and tested tool. As one of my philosophies says:

“We cannot solve today’s problems
with yesterday’s solutions.”

Hence, I clamped my fist “on the word BOSCARD”. Let’s find out more about it.”

BOSCARD

“The BOSCARD is a strategic planning tool used to give the terms of reference for new projects. The acronym stands for **background, objectives, scope, constraints, assumptions, risks, and deliverables**. These headings are typical in terms-of-reference and project initiation documents.”

“Let me give a little more explanation of the tool. Are you all ready?” I asked.

“Yes, we are,” they responded.

Background: Provide background information that includes the reasons for creating the project and mentions the key stakeholders who will benefit from the project’s outcome.

Objectives: Describes the project goals and links each of them with related S.M.A.R.T.E.R project objectives.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Remember: when initiating a project, it is important that all the parties involved agree upon a detailed list of objectives the project is expected to achieve before it’s started. Failure to obtain formal agreement almost always leads to some expectations not being met,” I said.

Define Crystal Clear Goals

“Sir, before we leave this point, can we just talk about goals and objectives? I feel it is important in managing projects’ milestones,” the chief imagineering officer asked.

I answered, “Most of us have set goals for ourselves in life. Goals help us to focus our minds on achieving what we set out to do. Most of us are aware that blurry goals lead to blurry places and that setting goals makes us more likely to attain what we want. As the saying goes,

“Without having a goal, it’s difficult to score.”

I continued, “However, to become self-fulfilling prophecies, our goals should be realistic and achievable, as we all know that ‘dangling the carrot just beyond the donkey’s reach’ will eventually make him give up trying and settle for lower results than he is capable of achieving.

“Having said that, the struggle may become easier if your goals are well thought out; people set S.M.A.R.T goals. At SEWA, we have taken this concept further by creating S.M.A.R.T.E.R goals,” I said.

“I have heard of S.M.A.R.T goals but never heard of S.M.A.R.T.E.R.,” the chief greenification officer responded.

I said, “The acronym S.M.A.R.T.E.R has many variations, including this one on your screen:

S—Specific, significant, stretching.
M—Measurable, meaningful, motivational.
A—Attainable, action-oriented, agreed upon.
R—Realistic, relevant, result-oriented.
T—Timely, tangible, traceable.
E—Explicit, encouraging.
R—Resolving, radical.

I continued, “Usually, a S.M.A.R.T.E.R session is followed by constructing an action plan to seize the opportunity at hand. What would happen if the action plan didn’t work? We change the plan but never the goal. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a rock-solid goal and remain open to altering the plan, both when and if required.”

Syeda added, “Being a utility giant, SEWA has a lot of short-term and long-term projects to execute.”

“Yes, but always focus on the WIG.”

“WIG?” Masud, the chief sustainalytics officer, inquired.

“**Wildly Important Goals**,” I replied with a chuckle. “Great! Let’s keep moving. Now we are all at the ‘scope’ station,” I said. “What do I mean by that? Can anyone answer me?” I asked.

Hassan replied, “I think the scope here refers to the part of project planning that involves determining and documenting a list of specific project goals, deliverables, features, functions, tasks, deadlines, and, ultimately, costs. In other words, it is what needs to be achieved and the work that must be done to deliver a project.”

“Absolutely right! Let’s have a look on the Scope slide,” I said.

The Scope slide read,

Scope: Provide a high-level description of the features and functions that characterize the product, service, or result the project is meant to deliver.

I could see their eyeballs moving from left to right.

“If there’s no questions. I’ll be moving to the constraints phase,” I said.

“Please do so, sir,” they answered.

Constraints: Identify the specific constraints or restrictions that limit or place conditions on the project, especially those associated with project scope.

The whole team was paying attention. So I moved on to explaining the rest of the phases.

Assumptions: Specify all factors that are, for planning purposes, considered to be true. During the planning process, these assumptions will be validated.

Risks: Outline the risks identified at the start of the project. Include a quick assessment of the significance of each risk and how to deal with it.

“Sir, thanks for sending us to the ISO-31000 Risk Management crash course at our SEWA Academy last week,” the chief SHEngineering officer said.

I smiled, then asked, “Can anyone tell me the name of the fastest company in history to reach \$100 billion in sales?”

“Yes, I heard the news last week, it’s Amazon,” the chief FinTtech officer pointed out, raising his hands.

“And what’s the secret behind such sweeping success?” I asked.

The project team looked at each other; some of them were even shrugging their shoulders.

I said, “Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of Amazon, leverages ‘risk’ and has created an exceptional culture of experimentation and invention.”

I continued, “He believes you don’t grow if you’re not willing to take risks, and he constantly evaluates Amazon’s ‘ROR.’”

“ROR!” the chief FinTech officer exclaimed. “What does it stand for?”

“Return on risk,” I said in an amused tone.

“Well, this is great news. Thank you, sir, for sharing this new concept with us. I’ve been in the finance sector for over a decade now. I have heard of ROI—return on investment—but never heard of ROR, return on risk.”

“Well, if you want to deep dive into ROR, Jeff Bezos has detailed and outlined his approach to risk and his growth strategies in his annual letters to Amazon’s shareholders that articulate how Bezos and Amazon use risk to their advantage.” I said.

“Wow,” the team said unanimously.

“Now let’s proceed,” I said.

Deliverables: Define the key deliverables the project requires to achieve the stated objectives.

“At this station, we ask several other questions, such as ‘Why this project? Why at this time? What are our expected results?’ Then, we set the expected deliverables.”

“The nice thing about the BOSCARD is that it provides a quick way of delivering all the necessary project information to the stakeholders without having to complete a full project initiation document,” the chief imagineering officer said.

“It’s a lot more *digestible* for busy stakeholders who might not have time to wade through a lengthy project initiation document when looking for a quick but detailed overview of the proposed project,” said the chief flexitricity officer.

I glanced at the team and said, “Next, we formulate our project charter. But before we proceed, let’s take a mini break. All of us will

get back here in thirty minutes. All right?” I said and stood up to leave the room.

“Where are you going, sir?” May, the chief imagineering officer, asked me.

“Don’t you remember? Today, we have a delegation of 24 MBA students from the Institute of Technology University, New York, visiting our head office and our Layyah Power Station University as a part of the UAE World Youth Leadership program,” I replied.

“Oh, yes,” she said.

The team came back after the break.

Project Charter

The project charter slide was displaying the following definition:

A project charter is a formal, typically short document that describes our project in its entirety in terms of what the objectives are, how they will be carried out, and who the stakeholders are. It is a crucial ingredient in planning out the project because it is used throughout the project lifecycle.

“Sir, what does it consist of?” Hassan asked.

I replied, “The project charter varies in specific content but typically documents the following:

- Reasons for the project’s initiation
- Benefits of the project
- Objectives and constraints of the project
- High-level scope statement describing all expected deliverables
- Who the main stakeholders are
- Identified risks
- General overview of the budget”

“If I may, where do we start now?” Fatima, the chief SHEngineering officer, asked.

“Brilliant question,” I said. “As Alec Mackenzie wrote,

“Taking action without thinking things through is
a prime source of problems.”

“Remember team,” I added, “your ability to make good plans before you act is a measure of your overall competence. Planning is imperative to everything. You may have heard of the Six-P Formula.”

“Hmm, no sir,” the chief imagineering officer said in a hushed tone.

“The Six-P Formula says, **‘Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance.’**”

Syeda, the chief knowledge officer, commented, “It sounds simple, but is it really as simple as it appears to be?”

I replied, “Planning is really quite simple to do. All you need is a piece of paper and a pen. The most sophisticated Outlook system, computer app, or time planner is based on the same principle. It is based on your sitting down and making a list of everything you have to do before you begin.”

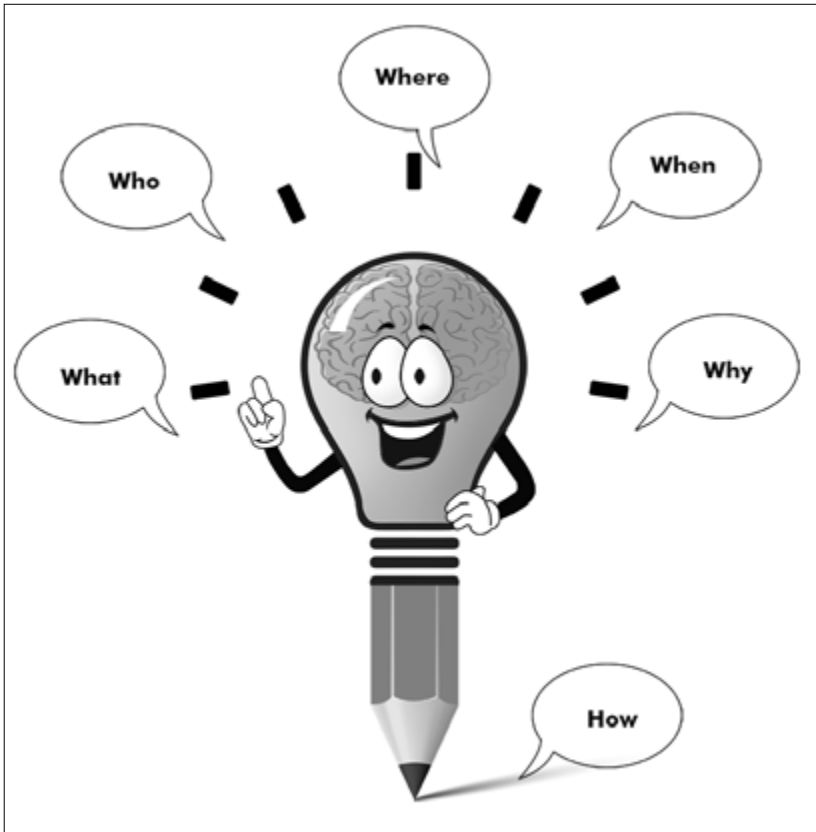
Syeda added, “I always work from a list. When something new comes up, I add it to the list before I do it.”

I added, “That’s great.”

I continued, “Now let me tell you about another fruitful technique. This will help you to get to the root of the problem, and it will come in very handy while you are planning your project.”

The Five Whys

“At this stage of the project, I felt we should conduct *The Five Whys*, also known as ‘root cause analysis.’ I have shared a self-explanatory infographic on screen. It is simple, yet effective, and is guaranteed to reap enormous benefits for SEWA.



“I studied this in business school long back. I would like to share with the team what *The Five Whys* stand for. May I, sir?” Syeda asked.

“Sure, go ahead.” I answered.

“We used this tool in both information gathering and problem solving,” Syeda said.

- **What** happened?
- **Who** was involved?
- **Where** did it take place?
- **When** did it take place?
- **Why** did it happen?

“Some authors add a sixth question, ‘how,’ to the list, though ‘how’ can also be covered by ‘what,’ ‘when,’ or ‘where.’

- **How** did it happen?

“However, you need to mind a few things, such as:

- Each question should have a factual answer.
- None of these questions can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”
- The result is outstanding and breakthrough thinking.
- From the perspective of innovation, this is critical to understand and will help you get the best from yourself, your colleagues, and your boss.”

Embrace the Socrates Mindset

The term “philosopher” comes from the ancient Greek, meaning “lover of wisdom.”

So, what is Socrates’ mindset?

In the words of Socrates,

“An unexamined life is not worth living.”

The spirit of the Socratic mindset pertains to a method employed by Socrates to unravel commonly held beliefs by exposing the unquestioned presuppositions that uphold them, giving rise to consistent, informed, and potentially unorthodox positions on complex issues. Socrates was dedicated to excavating complex philosophical, political, and social issues in order to rediscover reason and curiosity.

The asking of quality questions is the true purpose of philosophy.

- Why do we do things this way?
- Where do you want to go and where don’t you want to go?

“Sir, with your experience in managing projects and using project management tools, techniques, and methodologies, what advice you can pass to us here?” Masud asked.

1. **Value Engineering:** Value engineering includes taking an in-depth look at the functions of any equipment, facilities, services, systems, and materials used in the project. This part of project management requires an analysis to be performed on each of these components. When analyzing these components, managers will be looking for ways to improve cost effectiveness without negatively affecting the quality, reliability, performance, or reputation of the product or service.

“What were the other terms Jose, the chief FinTech officer mentioned? I asked.

“It was lean management and...” Ahmed Babiker, the chief culture officer, replied.

“Systems thinking and something related to design?” Hassan interrupted.

“I got it, it was value design,” Masud added to what Hassan had said.

Jose broke in. “No, it is called target value design.”

2. **Lean Management:** “Lean” refers to the elimination of waste. However, more importantly, lean means continuous improvement in all work processes. SEWA supports the concept of continuous improvement, so lean management is a must-have. Improving the work process(es) of those who do the work, or of those who are on-the-spot, is the essence of lean management.
3. **Systems Thinking:** Systems thinking has been defined as an approach to problem solving that attempts to balance holistic thinking and reductionistic thinking by taking the overall system into account, as well as its parts.
4. **Target Value Design (TVD):** TVD contains three key elements:
 1. A feasibility study at the beginning of the project (ideally with the key project participants) to determine the client’s values and constraints;

2. Setting the target cost to the amount that the client is willing or able to pay; and
3. Designing a construction to that target cost.

“Applying these techniques promises to help the projects raise the number of successful outcomes by allowing the project team to effectively control project costs,” I concluded.

“Alright, now. It’s time for a quick refresher break,” I said. “Go grab a cup of coffee and let’s get back in fifteen minutes.”



ECOMAGINATION

After a nice short break, the team gathered again.

Afra, the chief efficienology officer said, “Sir, you look ecstatic. What’s the news?”

“You are right, Afra, our chairman is effusing with excitement and elation,” Jose affirmed.

“Please share with us the news,” Ghada, the chief greenification officer, added.

“It’s great news. This should make us all very proud,” I said.

I continued, “SEWA has embarked on a program to increase power output and boost efficiency through the adoption of state-of-the-art power generation facilities, and expansion of the Al Layyah power plant is part of this initiative. SEWA is building a 1000 Megawatt (MW) gas-fired combined cycle power plant in the Al Layyah power plant. To accomplish this ambitious objective, we, on March 28, 2019, signed a buyer’s credit agreement (export loan) totaling up to approximately \$241 USD million with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC, Governor: Tadashi Maeda). This loan will provide financing for the purchase of a complete set of power generation equipment, including the gas turbine, manufactured by Mitsubishi Hitachi Power Systems, Ltd.”

“Great news! Let’s give a standing ovation to our chairman,” Afra said.

“Thank you all, please be seated,” I said.

“That was a very good piece of information to introduce Stage two, Ecomagination to all of us,” Ghada added.

I smiled.

“Ecomagination has secured a safe place in business dictionaries worldwide and is widely used in manufacturing companies. GE first introduced the term ecomagination to the market on May 9, 2005. GE describes the term ecomagination as a business strategy to deliver clean technology solutions that drive positive economic and environmental outcomes for customers and the world,” I continued.

Why Do We Ecomagine?

“Prior to my tenure at SEWA, the organization tended not to adhere to sustainability principles much. Also, many products, processes, and projects were not 100% environmentally friendly. Being a *sustainalist* (a sustainability specialist), I infused an eco-friendly and environmental psyche in all the functional and manufacturing units of SEWA. Therefore, we adapted the ecomagination philosophy.

“At SEWA, we strongly believe that whatever innovative products or services we introduce to the society must be safe and will not harm either people or the environment. In addition, we aim for our products to help us meet the pressing environmental challenges of today.

“At SEWA, we define ecomagination as the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful with the aim to find environmentally friendly solutions.

“Let me remind you all of our ecomagination principles. Our ecomagination progress depends on the following five principles:

1. Conscious leadership
2. Co-creation and collaboration with like-minded companies and suppliers
3. Agile innovation

4. Lean six sigma principles
5. Advanced technology and digitalization

“Wow! It’s almost too big to digest,” Ghada, the chief greenification officer said.

“Yes, keeping the above principles in mind, it is important to ensure that ecomagination is one of the main stages of our project management model,” I said.

SEWA Ecomagination Statement

The team members were having a side conversations with each other and enjoying the session when Fatima, the SHEngineering officer, clapped her hands to have everybody’s attention and said, “Dear friends, with our chairman’s permission, let me share with you all about SEWA’s Ecomagination statement, which the chairman has approved last week. She pressed her clicker, and a very simple slide went up on the screen. It read as follows:

Ecomagination is SEWA’s top strategic plan to reduce environmental impact at a local scale through providing clean and green solutions for our community and through our own operations. As a part of this strategy, we are investing in cleaner technology and business innovation, developing solutions with our partners to create a cleaner, greener, and smarter tomorrow.

“Oh, sounds great. It certainly will position SEWA as a sustainable organization,” said the chief sustainability officer.

“That’s true. But can we expect to see big organizations adopting that principle?” Asked the chief culture officer.

“Benchmarking. It’s the benchmarking tool that helps here. Let’s discover it together,” I said.

Benchmarking

“Robert C. Camp, in his book *Benchmarking: The Search for Industry Best Practices that Lead to Superior Performance*, states that benchmarking, by way of a working definition, can be best described as ‘The search for industry best practices that lead to superior performance,’” I said.

“The definition that I like most is this: Benchmarking encourages an external view to ensure correctness in setting objectives and developing the internal actions necessary to achieve those objectives. Further, benchmarking also involves key process steps that are indigenous to any industry,” I said.

“Are we going to benchmark the whole project management process?” Hassan asked.

I answered, “We will be benchmarking in the following areas:

- 1. Planning:** Identify what requires benchmarking.
- 2. Analysis:** Determine the current performance gaps.
- 3. Integration:** Establish functional goals.
- 4. Action:** Develop action plans.
- 5. Maturity:** Practice fully integrating action plans into processes.”



CRITRAL THINKING

“Now, this slide is so special to me personally,” I said.

“Why?” Hassan said.

“It’s a bold new concept for a creative thinking. It contains my self-coined term about thinking,” I said.

“I’m looking forward to know more about it,” Masud said.

“Here we go see the slides up,” I said.

“Oh no! What is this? A new lesson!” Jose exclaimed.

“How do we read that? It’s tongue-twisting,” the chief sustainability officer said.

“Oh, I like this term,” the chief design thinking officer laughed.

“Before revealing the secret behind this term, let me take you back to the original two terms of thinking: critical and lateral. It’s blend of the both,” I said.

“*Critical thinking* is defined as the objective analysis of facts to form a judgment, while *lateral thinking* is...can anyone answer me?” I asked.

The chief flexibility officer answered fast. “It is defined as solving problems through an indirect and creative approach.”

“Bravo! You really deserve a bravo card signed by me for your perfect answer. As a matter of fact, both are vital in and instrumental to problem-solving situations,” I answered.

“My self-coined term, CRITRAL Thinking, blends both types of thinking. CRITRAL Thinking is a unique blend of critical and lateral thinking. Critical thinkers analyze the nitty-gritty of any issue on the

basis of facts and figures, whereas lateral thinkers—also known as creative thinkers—look beyond face value and come out with solutions that are not mundane,” I said.

“Doing good does not result in a competitive advantage or cutting edge anymore. What gives a cutting edge in business is brilliant new creative ideas, radical innovation, and more disruption,” I continued.

“You mean we need to get more creative ideas?” Jose, the chief FinTech officer, asked.

I answered, “Yes, we live in a knowledge economy. It is not the efficiency of our operations that will help us to be an A-class organization but the brilliance of our ideas and how we introduce them to the market.”

I continued, “Sometimes, asking the right questions to the right people has the potential to discover and develop great ideas. As inventor Thomas Edison observed,

“The ideas I use are mostly the ideas of people who don’t develop them.”

“You know there is a lot more behind these words than what appears on the surface,” I continued.

Why this Type of Thinking?

“Many people have often asked about the effective use of my CRITICAL Thinking philosophy. In response, I have always given the same answer; a utility has both technically and non-technically driven projects, as well as those that are unique. Depending on the project, either a linear or a multi-disciplined way of thinking is necessary. To run them right, you need people with a specialized type of thinking. This is a major challenge that project managers face most of the time. If you are a project manager, you will most likely know exactly what I am talking about! However, fret not, for I have the solution.”

The team listened.

“Now take down the bullet points that you see onscreen in the front on your notepads,” I said, while clicking the pointer.

“In short,” I continued, “CRITICAL Thinking is a choice, an intentional way for you to navigate through your thinking. It’s a tool that helps leaders and managers to:

- See more possibilities than problems
- Reframe problems and setbacks into possibilities
- Ask ‘why’ and less about ‘what’ and ‘how’
- Turn those ‘what-ifs’ into realities
- Take the time to see the good in each moment and share positive learning with others
- Stretch the thinking around a concept in different directions, providing a stimulating discussion that will further strengthen the concept
- Reduce the ‘blind thinking’ spot
- Drive positive change
- Deliver value for the greater good in our rapidly changing world.”

“Wow, how wonderful!” Syeda exclaimed.

I said, “In our project management model, this was the teambuilding stage. First, we identified the key purpose of the team, which may vary from project to project. Some very common reasons for the team to come together are to interact with each other’s ideas and share common beliefs and to leverage their collective strengths, perspectives, skills, and experiences to achieve a set of commonly shared goals.

“I wanted to unleash my employees’ full creative energies, win their commitment, and radically improve processes. To be successful, an innovation process must deliver three things:

1. Superior solutions,
2. Lower risks and costs of change, and
3. Employee buy-in.

Synergy

“Team synergy is attained when the team can collectively generate more creative ideas than individuals could generate. This phenomenon occurs through the *cross-fertilization* of ideas, where an idea or suggestion from one person can stimulate spontaneous ideas and suggestions from the other team members. As a result, the output is greater than the input.”

I felt more clarification was needed. I continued, “We just need to modify our organizational habits, engage everyone around our business, and develop our leadership capability.”

Project Manager

“Sir, in your opinion, how would you define a project manager?” Ahmed Babiker asked.

“A project manager is a leader with two contradictory qualities: power and humility. And he or she has the ability to inspire confidence and support among the people who are needed to achieve project goals,” I said.

“Power and humility. I like that,” Ahmed Babiker responded.

“And one more thing: a strong project team coupled with the right skills isn’t enough. A team leader with the right interpersonal capabilities is also paramount. He or she ought to have the perfect mix of both hard and soft skills—in other words, a brave heart and a brilliant mind,” I continued.

“No kidding!” Syeda said in awe.

“And what makes a successful project manager?” Ahmed Babiker asked again.

“Sure, here you go. All of you, note down the list in front on the screen that details the common SEWA’s eight traits for becoming a successful project manager.”

1. *Highly* intelligent but not cunning.
2. A *visionary* but also a risk assessor.
3. *Forceful* but also sensitive to people's feelings.
4. *Dynamic* but also patient.
5. *Fluent communicator* but also a good listener.
6. *Decisive* but also reflective.
7. *Expert* in a wide range of different fields.
8. *Pioneering* but also an expert in task delegation.

A voice came from within. "Any overhaul won't succeed unless SEWA's employees get behind it. The surest route to winning their support is to involve and engage them in the process of generating ideas to bring that change."

As I was lost in these pensive thoughts, Hamda, my chief technology officer, breezed into my office.

"Pardon me, good morning, sir," she said in a cheerful tone. "I've come to thank you for giving me the most enjoyable lesson of my life."

Startled, I replied, "Well, I'm known for giving people the hardest time of their lives." I smiled slyly.

"Oh my God, I am thankful again that you've marked me off that list," she responded gleefully.

No doubt, she was as happy as a lark. And that was a welcome sight. Her smiling face made me smile. As they say, smiles are contagious! Her bright eyes, blissful demeanor, and spring-in-the-feet attitude lifted my spirits.

"Tell me, what news do you have?" I asked cheerfully.

Her face lit up.

“Sir, do you remember a couple of weeks ago, you nominated me to attend a ‘Design Thinking’ workshop in Dubai?” Hamda asked.

“Hmm...yes I do. I remember very well. How did it go?” I asked enthusiastically.

“Indeed,” she replied. “And I learned a bitter truth.” She paused, looking at my face, searching for an expression of consent.

“Go on. I’m all ears,” I said.

She said in one breath, “Our project team members generally are not designers and also aren’t used to doing face-to-face research with customers, getting deeply immersed in their perspectives, co-creating with stakeholders, and designing and executing experiments.”

She took another deep breath and continued. “This design-thinking workshop has reshaped my perception of innovation in project management in profound ways.”

I listened to her silently.

She continued, “You know what, sir? Now I realize that we’ve been managing projects at the wrong side of innovation.”

“How is that?” I asked, quite awestruck.

“In fact,” she replied, “design thinking takes a different approach: identify hidden needs by having the innovator live the customer’s experience. Immersion in user experiences provides raw material for deeper insights.”

“That’s wonderful.” I remarked.

“Thank you so much for creating the SEWA project management model. Really proud to work under your leadership, sir,” Hamda said.

I was genuinely pleased with her answer. She had convincingly elaborated on the entire process of design thinking. Her conviction sparked an idea in my CRITICAL mind.

How about if I ask her to win over my nine champions and brainwash them to stop fuffing about and do some meaningful innovation in managing their projects? I thought.

“Hamda, you are my glimmer of hope here,” I said. “My nine champions have excelled in the ‘Imagineering’ and the ‘Ecomagination’ stages of project management. However, they have been at

loggerheads when it comes to a *whole* brain thinking process, like my CRITRAL Thinking philosophy.”

She jumped off her seat and said, “I strongly feel that design thinking will support and compliment the CRITRAL Thinking process in a big way.”

I said, twisting my wrist, “Sounds great! I want you to hook them in. What do you think? Can you do it?”

“The pleasure is all mine, sir,” she said in a reaffirming tone. “Let’s give it a try.”

“Thanks, Hamda,” I said. “Appreciate it. Please proceed to the ‘War of Ideas’ room; I will set up a sit-down with the team in ten minutes.”

“Are you talking about the corner office with soundproofed glass walls?” She asked.

“Bravo! You guessed it right,” I replied with a smile. “That’s the best place for clashes of ideas and disagreement of opposing ideals, ideologies, or concepts,” I added. “Always remember that the true spirit of conversation consists in building on each other’s observation, not overturning it.”

“That’s amazing,” Hamda said in an excited tone. “Finally, I am getting to see this fancy-named room. I’ve heard colleagues mentioning this room in their chats but never got an opportunity to see it for real.”

“No worries, your wait is over. Just ten more minutes,” I replied jovially,

I knew I was dealing with a bunch of bright individuals, and that’s what counts, I told myself.

There was no grain of doubt in the minds of my team. Now, the team was prepped for a giant leap—the move onto agile processes. But they may have had fears of failure. As seen on the TV game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* sometimes it really does pay to phone a friend. Hence, I thought, an excellent way for me to alleviate those fears is by giving them a chance to talk with another person in their position who’s happy with Agile and Design Thinking processes.

War of Ideas Room

Ten minutes later, the team assembled in the ‘War of Ideas’ room. It’s a room where we make clever choices and positive decisions and ultimately find fulfillment by noticing the positive details of our relationships. And in this room, I usually discover the right-brain thinkers and the left-brain thinkers. As Blaine Lee Pardoe wisely said,

“Before you attempt to ‘set’ things right,
make sure you ‘see’ things right.”

This lovely quote was helpful to understand that most miscommunication is a result of people’s having different assumptions. ‘The War of Ideas’ room is the place where we correct those assumptions and prevent miscommunication.

The nine champions had responded and assembled in the room, and Hamda was busy writing something on the flip chart.

I set the ball rolling by saying, “Team, I have invited Hamda to join our meeting. Being SEWA’s chief technovation officer, she would like to share her experience at a recent design thinking workshop that she successfully attended in Dubai. She believes this will improve the quality of your CRITICAL Thinking and bring innovative solutions to your projects.”

“Another so-called fancy innovation process. We don’t want anything extra—a fifth wheel,” the chief greenification officer said.

“Just listen!” Hamda said. “I didn’t invent the design thinking, I discovered it—at a training program. Design thinking is an essential tool for simplifying and humanizing. It can’t be an ‘extra’; it needs to be a core competence. With design thinking, we help ourselves to think differently. And this is one of our chairman’s goals, to think differently. Isn’t it?”

“Well, that’s what all thinking methodologies claim,” the chief greenification officer replied. “Tell me, what’s new about this one?”

“Design thinking is not just about being creative, but you can really apply your solutions to real-life situations and business situations; it will give SEWA the shot in the arm it needs,” Hamda answered.

“Design thinking is a lot of fun. But it’s not only fun. We are solving really complex problems with design thinking in a creative way and very fast. And I guessed this what we are looking for now to solve our projects issues,” she continued.

There was confusion and murmuring in the room.

“Okay, let me explain,” she replied. “For example, applying the design thinking principles, we would be able to reimagine our existing processes and products through the lens of the customer. And that makes the difference. I should say the big difference.”

“I hate to be the one to say this,” the chief FinTech officer quipped, “but I don’t believe in all that you are saying. It’s simply a tall claim. How can a better customer experience lead to an improved product design? I can’t see how this new thinking system can improve our situation. In fact, it will probably make matters worse!”

Hamda winced as she listened to Jose’s last comment.

“If customers were to design our products, we wouldn’t need product engineers, eh? Also, we can’t believe everything that the customers tell us. Have I made myself clear?” Jose continued.

“What do you mean, it won’t work? Have you ever thought, why are we actually doing what we are doing? Who are we doing it for?” Hamda pointed out. She sighed and continued, “Here’s what the truth is; we’ve become stagnant. We’ve flat-lined mentally. Why aren’t we looking at things through a fresh lens?” She gave Jose a piercing look and asked, “When was the last time you had a good thought for the first time?”

The room went silent as everyone thought.

“Now, you are mincing words. Tell us clearly, what exactly do you want?” the chief greenification officer asked sternly.

Hamda flashed an uncomfortable smile and said, “All I mean is, to not do what we usually do, like immediately jump in the solution but really spend a lot of time on the customer and understand things. In short, really get into the customers’ needs first.”

I smiled, as I liked what I was hearing. And I thought of jumping into the conversation to rescue Hamda. “Hamda, why don’t you explain the complete design thinking process to the team?”

“Let me explain it this way,” she said. “We’ll begin with my favorite definition of design thinking; it goes like this:

Design thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition, and systematic reasoning to explore possibilities of what could be and to create desired outcomes that benefit the customer. A design mindset is not problem-focused; it’s solution-focused and action oriented. It involves both analysis and imagination.

I stood up and said, “My champions, authors James Manktelow and Julian Birkinshaw explained in their book, *100 Ways To Be a Better Boss* that traditionally, many companies approach product development through technological innovation. They work on what is technically feasible in an R&D laboratory, and they get designers and marketers involved in the latter stages of the process to help make the product more visually appealing, or to position it in an attractive way.

“The book also claims that, although this approach isn’t wrong, it has significant limitations. It is very common for R&D people to work on technologically interesting problems regardless of whether they have any value in the marketplace; this technology-centered approach often results in over-engineered or ill-conceived products.”

I continued, “In today’s competitive markets, a more thoughtful approach to innovation is required. In most business-to-consumer (B2C) markets, customers search out end-user ratings and product reviews online and use them to choose between the many options available to them. In these cases, underlying technologies are often relatively unimportant because many organizations can master them and integrate them well. What really matters is how the product meets a customer’s practical and emotional needs. For this to happen, the development process needs to be driven by a deep understanding of customer needs right from the start.”

The team listened with intense attention.

The Art of Thinking

“Dear colleagues,” Hamda said. “I do appreciate your concern over using the design thinking tool. At the same time, I do respect His Excellency Dr. Rashid, our chairman’s, decision in using his coined term, CRITICAL Thinking as one of the stages in the SEWA project management model. I can clearly see a gap here, and that needs to be bridged. This is where an approach called design thinking is useful, pioneered as early as 1969 and more recently championed by the California design agency IDEO.

“The design thinking process can be simplified to the seven key steps split into three phases. Allow me to take you through this lovely journey. Are you ready?” she asked.

“We’re all ears,” the team answered.

“The first phase is called the inspiration phase. Look at the slide up here, please,” she requested.

Inspiration Phase

- Understand the business problem and constraints.
- Empathize with users’ problem and experience.
- Understand what the organization can do.

“I am done with the inspiration phase and moving to the second phase—Ideation,” she continued.

Ideation Phase

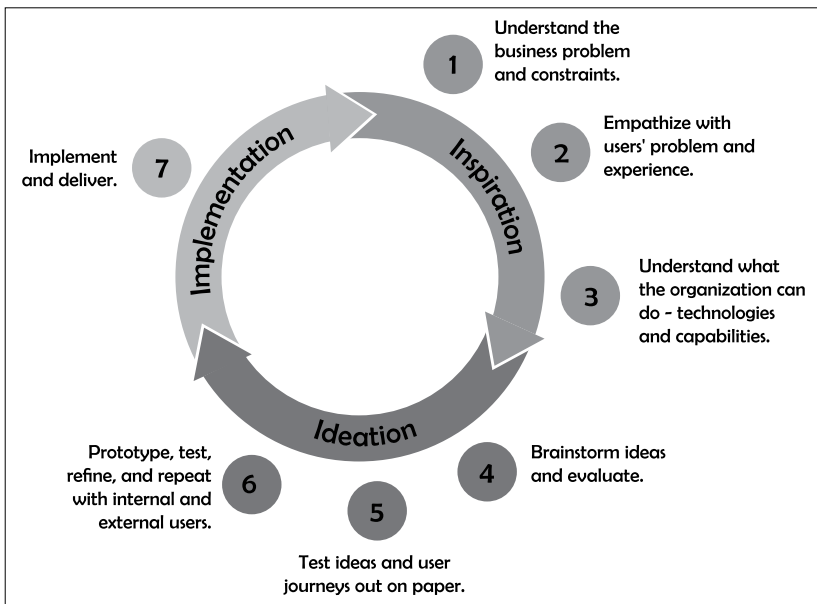
- Brainstorm ideas and evaluate.
- Test ideas and user journeys out on papers.
- Prototype, test, refine, and repeat with internal and external users.

“If you don’t have further questions, let’s keep moving,” I said.

Implementation Phase

- Implement and deliver.

“The Design Thinking process is summarized for you all in the following slide,” said Hamda.



“Now, let’s get down to business and give more explanation to each step,” Hamda said.

1. *Understand the business problem and constraints.* Here, you need to develop a clear understanding of the problem you’re trying to solve. This isn’t always as obvious as it seems. Here’s an example of how Stanford Health Care (SHC) administrators incorporated design thinking into planning the new Stanford Hospital in 2018. The SHC staff used design thinking to complete a plan to

redesign two nursing units in the current hospital to serve only patients with cancer. “Patients and their families were involved from the start,” said Helen Waters, a design and innovation leader with Stanford Health Care. “We wanted to know what they needed and what they felt was missing.”

The process included seven months of conducting interviews and tabletop exercises and simulating actual work routines in the proposed layouts of the nursing units to be redesigned.

2. *Empathize with users’ problem and experience.* Next, you need to talk to and understand your target customers, appreciate how they see the world, *empathize* with their life situations, and experience and understand what they want, like, and engage with.

“Sir, before we proceed further, what is the difference between empathize and sympathize?” Afra asked, while looking at me.

“That’s a good question,” I replied. “As Thomas J. Watson, IBM founder, famously said,

“The ability to ask the right question is more than half the battle of finding the answer.”

“Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It is the act of putting yourself in others’ shoes and seeing a problem from their point of view. Being empathetic towards someone doesn’t mean that you are agreeing with them. It just means that you understand their truth,” I answered.

“Ohh! That’s a one-million-dollar answer,” she said with a smile.

“By the way,” I continued, “we can see that empathy is one of the five components of *emotional intelligence*. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.”

“Here’s an example; you all must have ordered food from Uber Eats, right? Do you know that they approach their food delivery service with a design thinking mindset? One of the top officials from the company explains how empathy is essential to their practice. In one

of his interviews, he mentioned that, “To understand all our different markets and how our products fit into the physical conditions of each city, we constantly immerse ourselves in the places where our customers live, work, and eat. Sitting in our offices in San Francisco or New York, we can’t truly understand the experiences of a person on the streets of Bangkok or London.”

“Wow, that is incredible,” Masud said.

“But mind you all, empathy doesn’t mean pleasing everybody. It’s about the ability to read between the lines.”

“And sympathy?” Afra asked.

“By contrast, sympathy is a feeling of care and concern for someone, accompanied by a wish to see them better off or happier,” I said.

“I got it now,” Afra said.

“Let’s move to the rest of the list,” I said.

3. *Understand what the organization can do – technologies and capabilities.* This involves exploring what the organization is capable of doing well and what it won’t be able to do.

“So, here we’ve completed phase one of the journey—the inspiration phase. Let’s move to phase two which is...”

I looked at the team for an answer.

“It’s the ideation phase,” Jose said.

“Bravo! Let’s keep moving,” I said.

“Hamda, can you tell me the difference between brainstorming and ideation. Aren’t they the same?” May, the chief imagineering officer, asked.

Hamda chuckled and replied, “Not at all. They are not the same thing.”

May gasped.

“Brainstorming is a method for generating ideas to solve a problem. It usually involves a group, under the direction of a facilitator. The strength of brainstorming is the potential participants have in drawing associations between their ideas in a free-thinking environment, thereby broadening the solution space.

A reinvention of traditional brainstorming, Ideation is a technique that involves both the left and right sides of the brain to allow breakthroughs from entrenched habits of thought and persistent difficult problems. The process of Ideation begins with individual ideas, more accountability, consensus building, and ultimate involvement with participants ‘voting with their feet,’” Hamda answered in one breath.

4. *Brainstorm ideas and evaluate.* Having understood the context, brainstorm ideas. Then evaluate them and select the most promising ones.
5. *Test ideas and user journeys out on paper.* For promising ideas, draft them on paper and put yourself into the mind of your users. Think about what their experience will be, both with the product you’re thinking of and with competing products.
6. *Prototype, test, refine, and repeat with internal and external users.* Take the best ideas forward and build prototypes of them. Test these with users and go through repeated cycles of refinement until you are confident they would buy them.
7. *Implement and deliver.* Now take your best-received prototype through to production.

As they say, “a little help goes a long way.” Hamda’s explanation provided that “little help” to her office buddies. The nine champions were thankful to me and confirmed their positive feelings about the design thinking meeting.



EXECUTION

Doing Things Differently

“I have gone easy on you on the previous four stages of the model,” I announced in a serious tone. “This one is very important. This is where everyone engages and contributes their full intellectual capacity. It is the walk-the-talk phase. Execution is a critical stage of the SEWA project model, as almost 80% of the work is carried out here. So roll up your sleeves. Now it’s time to put the plan into action. In short, it’s time to execute and not excuse.”

The team assumed alert sitting positions.

The chief flexitricity officer added, “Moreover, the execution plan will serve as the main communication vehicle to ensure that everyone is aware and cognizant of the project objectives and how they will be accomplished.”

“Well said, Hassan,” I replied. “Let’s all give him a big round of applause.”

The team golf clapped and murmured in appreciation of Hassan’s prompt answer.

“You don’t have to golf clap here—let’s see some enthusiasm, folks! This is do or die stage!” I replied.

“So, how do we navigate this important stage?” the chief imagining officer asked.

Picking up the whiteboard marker, I swiftly moved towards the board and wrote “project execution” in big bold fonts.

“Let me explain,” I said tapping the board. “Project execution is the fourth phase of the SEWA project management model and one of the most vital of the project phases. It is the phase where we will construct our deliverables and present them to our customers and key stakeholders.”

I paused, breathed a big huff, and said, “This is usually the longest phase of the project life cycle and predictably the most demanding.”

Their eyes opened wide.

“Oh, you have me worried now,” the chief FinTech officer commented in a grim tone.

“Now don’t worry your pretty little head about it. Just listen to this,” I said. “Project execution’s key purpose is to complete the work defined in the project management charter and to meet key project objectives.”

Then, while writing on the board, I said, “Here are two principal things a leader can influence when it comes to producing results:

1. Strategy (or plan) and,
2. Ability to execute that strategy.”

The team began to studiously take notes. I stepped back from the board.

Watch Out

I gave them a couple of minutes to pen down the two main points that I had written on the board.

Once they had put their pens back, Masud, the chief sustainability officer, exclaimed, “Watch out everyone. We need to do all of these things!”

Everyone raised their eyebrows.

Masud cleared his throat and said, “No doubt they are all good things to do, but the more you try to do, the less energy you have to give to any *one* thing.”

I said, “As we often say,

“A lever must move a lot to move the rock a little.”

“Now, stop for a moment and ask yourself this question: Which of these do you struggle with more? Is it creating a strategy or executing the strategy?”

The team looked a bit agonized.

“I bet it’s creating strategy,” Ahmed Babiker, the chief culture officer, opined.

“No way, strategy is a cakewalk, executing the strategy is the infamously tough thing out there,” the chief efficienology officer contradicted.

“What do you think, sir?” Syeda, the chief knowledge officer asked in a soft tone.

“Every time I’ve posed this question to managers anywhere in the world, their answer is immediate: ‘Execution!’ In fact, this is what one of my friends had to say: ‘Once I’ve decided what to do, my biggest challenge is in getting people to execute it at the level of excellence I need.’”

The team listened in silence.

“But, then,” I said, “one of you may ask, ‘what’s revolutionary about that?’” I smiled and added, “A question that has always teased me is, why is execution so difficult? After all, if the strategy is clear, and I as the leader am driving it, won’t the team *naturally* engage to achieve it?”

They kept staring at me, expecting me to answer the aforementioned question.

I looked at the team and said, “Alas! The answer is ‘no.’”

“So what’s the common challenge?” the chief efficienology officer queried. “How can we sidestep the execution phobia?”

I smiled and said, “Before I answer your question, I would like to ask you all a child’s riddle.”

“Wow, I love to solve riddles!” Afra said in an excited tone.

“Here’s the riddle,” I said.

“Five frogs are sitting on a log. Four decide to jump off.
How many are left?”

“Even a preschooler can answer this easily,” Afra responded. “Just subtract four from five. The answer is, one frog is left behind.”

“Answer: Five Why?

Because deciding and doing are not the same thing,”

I replied with a sly smile. “Executing a strategy requires a significant change in human behavior—the behavior of many, or even all, of the people in the team or the organization at large.”

I chuckled, and said, “In short, when you execute a strategy that requires a lasting change in the behavior of other people, you are facing one of the greatest leadership challenges you will ever face. That’s the big secret. As every leader knows, getting the commitment of hearts and minds, the kind of commitment that will endure in the midst of the daily grind, is not easy. You can’t go for the fast buck, the easy dollar.”

I continued in a loud tone, “To be successful, you will need more than just compliance from people; you will need their love and commitment.”

“I agree with you, sir,” the chief culture officer added. “Mostly, leaders are controlled by philosophies that are shortsighted. They don’t believe in striking a long-term committed relationship with their employees.” He tapped Masud, the chief sustainalytics officer, on the arm and said, “As goofy as it may sound, this is how most managers/leaders function. They follow the classic herd mentality.”

I added, “That’s a thorny situation, a difficult one.”

“But there has to be a solution to this quandary,” the SHEngineering officer pointed out.

“Then let’s all find out,” I said.

The Solution

“In a key study on organizational change,” I began, “the global management-consulting firm Bain & Company reports these findings: about 65 percent of initiatives required significant behavioral change on the part of *front-line* employees—something that managers often

fail to consider or plan for in advance. People follow people, not ideas,” I said in a heavy tone.

I continued, “It’s natural for a leader to assume the people are the problem. After all, they are the ones not doing what we need to have done. But you would be wrong. The people are not the problem!”

The chief flexibility officer added, “I agree with you, sir, it is easy for leaders to forget that leading is as much about inspiring the imagination and actions of the followers as it is about getting the direction and strategy right.”

I smiled at him and said, “W. Edwards Deming, the father of the quality movement, taught that any time the majority of the people behave a particular way the majority of the time, then people are not the problem. The problem is inherent in the system. As a leader, you own responsibility for the system. Although a particular person can be a big problem, if you find yourself blaming the people, you should look again. And again.”

The team listened in silence.

“Sir, this reminds me of the no complaining policy that you introduced to us last year,” May said.

“Bravo, May!” I continued, “I have seen time and time again that when leaders shift their perspective from the negative side of the ledger to the positive side, it creates a positive chain reaction.”

Silence prevailed.

The chief knowledge officer broke the silence by asking, “How can we apply this to solve the challenges in SEWA’s projects?”

I replied immediately, “You are about to have one of two reactions: ‘Oh, cool!’ or ‘Oh, no!’ But either way, there is nothing you can do to change results; they are in the past. Only by learning what worked and learning from the past can we be more effective in the present and more creative in shaping future projects.”

“So, where do we begin?” the chief greenification officer asked.

The chief knowledge officer replied, “Well, my common sense says that it will start by creating project schedules.”

“Bravo, good job!” I said. “And here’s how we can do it. In order to develop our project schedules, we first need to define the activities,

sequence them in the right order, estimate the resources needed, and estimate the time it will take to complete the tasks. In short, create the *modus operandi* of our projects.”

All of them started to take notes. They were vigorously noting each and every word that I uttered. They were very committed.

Project Schedules

“If you remember,” I began, “project schedules grow out of the basic documents that initiate the project—the Project Charter, which include start and end dates, budget information, and the scope statement.”

I continued, “As we all know, SEWA managers often cited that failure to deliver projects on time was one of their biggest challenges. Time has the least amount of flexibility; it passes no matter what happens on a project. At SEWA, project schedule issues were the main reasons for conflicts in projects, particularly during the second half of their duration. Am I clear?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” Syeda said.

Slice & Dice

“Now let me present to you all a new way to control and execute a project. It’s Slice and Dice,” I said.

“Slice and Dice! What is slicing and dicing?” Masud asked.

“Slice and Dice refers to a strategy for segmenting, viewing, and understanding data in a database. Users ‘slice and dice’ by cutting a large segment of data into smaller digestible topics/parts and repeating this process until arriving at the right level of detail for analysis. Slicing and dicing information helped us to further analyze the business, thereby enabling us to get the results we need. Furthermore, the method presents data in new and diverse perspectives. In summary, since I prefer being data-driven as well as data-informed, this process has proven effective,” I said. “This method entails dividing a quantity

of information into smaller parts to analyze it more closely or in different ways. Oh, I remember what W. Edwards Deming said once:

“In GOD we trust. All others bring data.”

“SEWA’s mega projects equated mega challenges. Hence, I focused on breaking them down into several mini projects using the Slice and Dice method,” I said.

“I am sure this method is going to be a good one in controlling our projects,” Moza said.

“Also, slicing and dicing helps me to select the activities I believe will have the greatest impact on achieving my project goals. In the words of consultant and entrepreneur Richard Koch, in business,

“The mass of activity will always be pointless, poorly conceived, badly directed, wastefully executed, and largely beside the point. A small portion of activity will always be terrifically effective....it is probably not what you think it is; it is opaque and buried within a basket of less effective activity.”

The 80/20 Principle

Then, I stood up to speak to the group. “Well, all the aforementioned tools are effective in one way or another, but I love to follow a magical management tool. It’s called the 80/20 principle.”

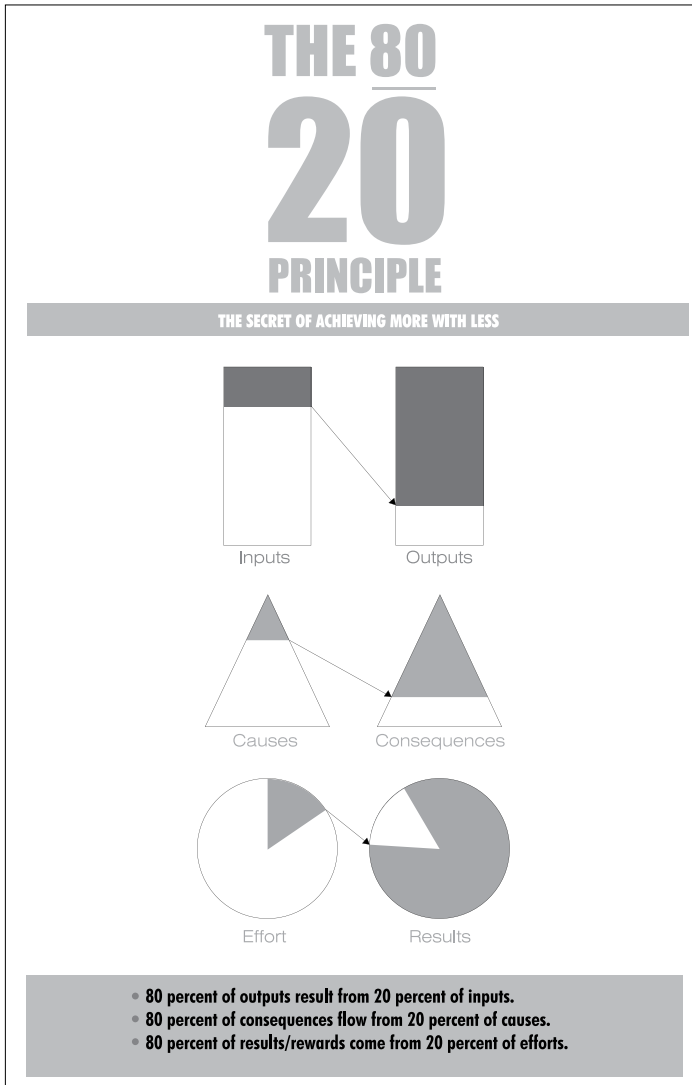
“Really! It does sound a big deal,” Ghada remarked.

“In 1897, Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto discovered the 80/20 principle. The underlying pattern of his principle asserts that there is an inbuilt imbalance between causes and results, inputs and outputs, and efforts and rewards. The 80/20 relationship provides a good benchmark for this imbalance. A typical pattern will indicate that 80 percent of outputs result from 20 percent of inputs. Also, eighty percent of consequences flow from 20 percent of causes, while 80 percent of results/rewards come from 20 percent of efforts. In business, many examples of the 80/20 principle have been validated:

20 percent of products usually account for usually 80 percent of sales; so do 20 percent of customers,” I said.

“That’s fascinating!” Syeda exclaimed.

“This philosophy entices me because I want to both multiply SEWA’s project profitability and effectiveness while raising quality and trimming costs,” I said in an excited tone. “Here, look at the screen to understand this timeless concept,” I concluded.



Swiss Cheese Method

“Apart from Slice and Dice, you may also adopt the Swiss Cheese Method to overcome any mammoth-size task that you’ve been shelving on the back burner.”

“Wait a moment! Did we hear Swiss cheese? Swiss cheese is my favorite topping on any pizza.”

“Yes, you heard it right,” I replied. “This bit is quite interesting. So listen up everyone,” I continued. “Brian Tracy discusses the Swiss Cheese Method in his book *Eat that Frog!* This is the ultimate go-to technique if you have humongous tasks lying undone and you’ve been procrastinating for a long while.”

“Please tell us more,” Fatima, chief SHEngineering officer pleaded.

I smiled and replied, “The author states that we can use this technique to get ourselves into gear by resolving to punch a hole in the task, like a hole in a block of Swiss cheese.”

“And how does it help?” Fatima asked.

“In doing so, you ‘Swiss cheese’ a task when you resolve to work for a specific time period on it.”

“How long?” Syeda asked.

I said, “Well, it may be as little as five or ten minutes, after which you will stop and do something else.”

“Wow, I am going to put the ‘Swiss cheese’ technique into action immediately to get started on the large, complex, multitask job that I’ve been putting off.”

“Sounds like a great plan. Do let us know how you fare on it,” Hassan exhorted.

“Very well, then, team, now moving onto the next slide. And it’s about timeboxing.”

Timeboxing

“Has anyone ever come across the term ‘timeboxing?’” I asked.

No one had, except Hassan, who raised both hands.

Everyone shot him a skeptical look.

“By the way, your colleague Hassan is a master of this tool,” I said.

“What? I’ve never heard of that sport. I’ve only heard of and watched kickboxing!” the chief sustainability officer said.

“Well, it’s far from kickboxing. Timeboxing is a time management tool used in agile project management,” the chief flexibility officer answered with glee.

“Wow, tell us more. It sounds interesting,” the SHEngineering officer requested.

Hassan continued, “Here, you break down projects or daily tasks into set periods of time, which allows you to accomplish more than you would with a less organized schedule.”

“Okay, so where does the term ‘timebox’ come from?” the chief imagineering officer inquired.

Hassan added, “To use this time management tool, you allocate a certain number of hours or days, called a ‘timebox,’ to each activity. You then use this time – and only this time – to complete the task. In this way, you give all of our tasks equal attention by allocating a certain amount of time to each.”

The chief culture officer responded, “What an amazing tool. Timeboxing seems to be a simple and effective way to manage our own, and our team members’, daily workload. For ourselves, this ensures that we don’t spend too long on a task that isn’t worth the effort. For team members, it will help to ensure that they don’t over-engineer solutions, and that they don’t unintentionally blow the budget we have available for the work.”

“But can you tell us how to use timeboxing to schedule our day?” the chief FinTech officer asked.

Hassan replied, “Sure, it’s not rocket science. First, we need to estimate how long each item on our to-do list or action program should take to complete and allocate a set amount of time to each one.” He paused, then said, “Also, don’t forget to include breaks and build in contingency time for unexpected requests or interruptions.”

“Then?” May, the chief imagineering officer inquired.

“Then set a timer on your smartphone or computer to alert you to when you should move on to your next timebox.”

“What should be the length of a timebox?” Ahmed Babiker, the chief culture officer, asked.

Hassan answered, “Choose the length of time that works best for you. Usually 25 minutes, followed by a short break. You might want to skip these rest periods if you’re absorbed in a task, but try to avoid doing this too often, because they allow you to return to your work with more energy and enthusiasm.”

Everyone was engrossed in taking notes.

“And last but not least, make sure that you analyze what you’ve accomplished and review your progress at the end of each timebox. Ask yourself the following: did you complete your work? If not, why not? How will you schedule your tasks differently next time?”

“Thank you, Hassan, for sharing this important tool with us,” I said.

“It’s my pleasure, sir,” he replied.

“Timeboxing is definitely a great tool. However, I won’t be surprised if I hear time-wrestling soon,” Masud, the chief sustainability officer, said giggling.

Everyone laughed and nodded.

Smart Meetings

“You may ask, why do we need smart meetings? My answer is this. Based on previous projects handling in SEWA, the following are two important facts about SEWA project communication; we sent 70 emails per day and conducted over 50 meetings per month.”

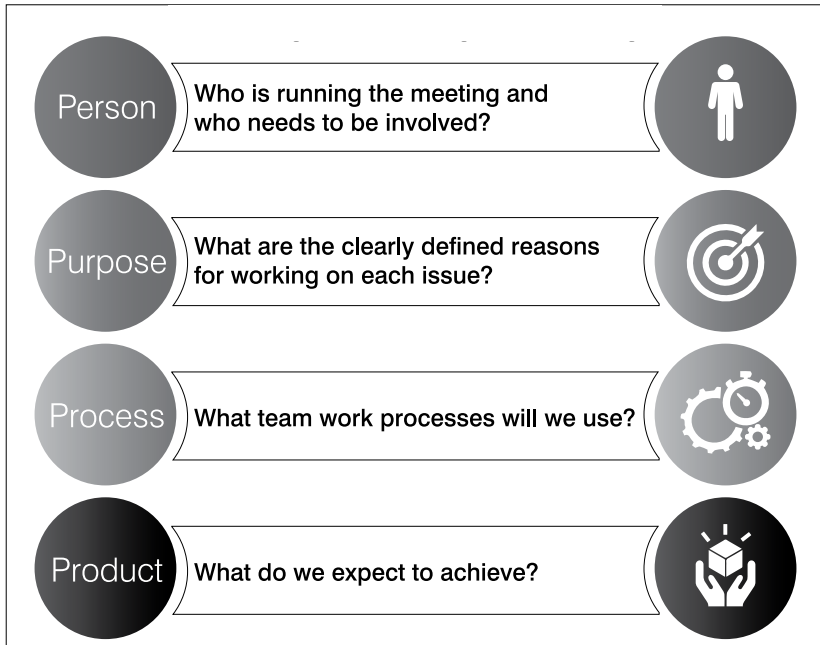
“Shocking! I wasn’t expecting it to be that much,” Hassan said.

No Pointless Meetings

“It’s a fact that meetings are a serious drain on an organization’s time and resources. A 2018 study conducted by Quartz at Work found that meetings can consume up to 17% of the workweek and an estimated \$37 billion per year. I used to bulletproof my project meetings by creating a unique process. The European Business Review article laid

out the magical 4Ps model of effective meetings. I was so moved by it that I adopted it in my project meetings. It demonstrated immediate benefits and streamlined most of my day's meetings.

“Dear team, whenever you are about to engage in meetings, or any form of teamwork, it pays to set out the 4Ps model of effective meetings, which I am highlighting in the following slide. Stay tuned,” I said.



“Let me explain in more depth about the model. Just pay attention,” I said.

Person (Who is running the meeting and who needs to be involved?)

The job for the “Person” is to clarify who needs to be involved in each part of the agenda. In SEWA’s case, the “Person” is not necessarily the agenda owner, team leader, or even the subject expert, just someone who is good at keeping focused will do the job.

Purpose (What are the clearly defined reasons for working on each issue?)

The “Purpose” question provides a strategic analysis of what you need to be working on, at the team level, in order to achieve your business plan. It is a relevance check and helps to maintain a balance in teamwork. For us, asking “why” helped to bring clarity, priority, and a sense of ownership into the meetings, which was heavily lacking in SEWA projects.

Process (What teamwork process will we use?)

The “Process” is linked with the “Purpose.” In fact, the process you use to achieve your purpose will be driven by the nature of the purpose. To tease it out, you ask a simpler question, “Is your purpose more strategic or more operational? Are you looking to set or refine direction (strategic) or report on progress or deviations against plan (operational)?

“I really like this piece of the model. Certainly I’m going to use it,” Afra said.

“Great! Let me explain the last P,” I commented.

Product (What do we expect to achieve?)

The final P, and in many ways the most important one, is having “the end in mind.” If the “Purpose” is at the strategic level (the “why”) but the “Product” is at the operational level (the “what”), you won’t achieve a thing. Specifying the “Product” at the start of the meeting helps us to arrive at a clear destination.

“Team, I am done here. Yet following the above 4Ps will lead us to better result-oriented and shorter meetings. To put it into practice, we need to put up wallpaper of 4Ps in all our project meeting rooms to serve as reminders,” I said.

“It will save us enough time, energy, morale, and oxygen to focus on other priorities,” Masud said.

“Bravo, sir, well explained,” the chief design thinking officer said.

Making Every Meeting Matter

“I am aware of the fact that the human brain isn’t meant to process so many disparate topics in one sitting. There needs to be greater clarity and focus, which means that there needs to be different kinds of meetings for different kinds of issues. And yes, that means there would be more meetings, not fewer,” I explained.

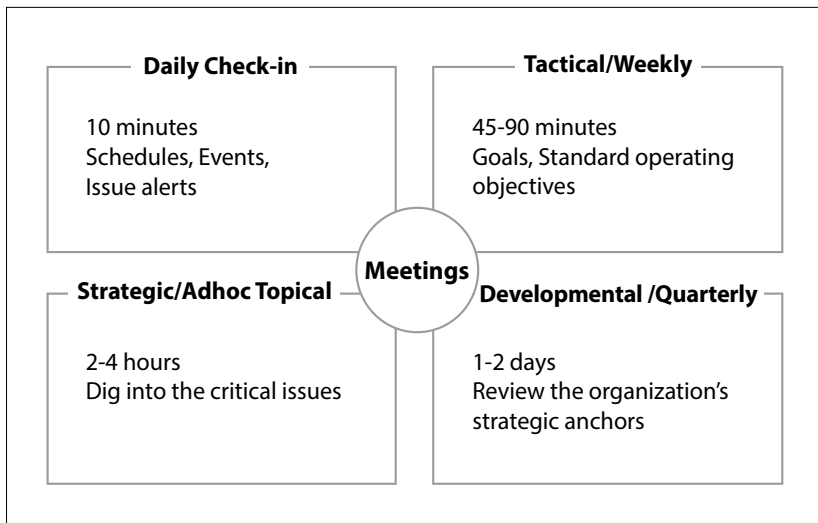
“Oh, seriously?” said Moza, the chief restructuring officer asked.

“Yes, be ready!” I said.

Looking at the team, I said, “My last summer holiday in the US, while waiting for my aircraft at the J.F. Kennedy International Airport, New York, to go to Los Angeles, I happened to see a bookstore. Since I had some time before boarding, I strolled into the bookstore and my eyes fell upon an interesting book.”

“Which book was it, sir?” Moza asked.

“*The Advantage*, written by Patrick Lencioni. According to him, there are four basic types of meetings. For ease of reading, I have recreated an infographic of it. Look at the screen,” I said.



“Looks cool. I like it!” the chief design thinking officer exclaimed.

“Thank you. Let’s have a close look at each meeting,” I responded with a smile.

“We already are,” Ghada said.

1. Administrative (Daily Check-in)

Essentially this is about the team getting into the habit of gathering once a day, for no more than ten minutes, to clear the air about anything administrative that would be helpful to know. Schedules, events, and alerts, that kind of stuff.

2. Tactical (Weekly Staff Meetings)

This kind of meeting is about having a real-time agenda—this entails creating a one-page scorecard or chart—that includes the thematic goal, defining objectives, and their standard operating objectives. This type of meeting can consume 45–90 minutes in totality.

3. Strategic (Adhoc Topical)

This is the most interesting and compelling of all meetings. The purpose of this kind of meeting is to dig into the critical issues that can have a long-term impact on the organization—any issue that warrants more time, energy, and preparation. As for the timing of topical meetings, it is okay to spend two to four hours at one go. No one is going to complain about spending too much time discussing critical issues.

4. Developmental (Quarterly Off-site Reviews)

This meeting is about stepping back from the business to get a fresh perspective, which is why it is done away from the office. Activities that should be addressed during these meetings include reviewing the organization’s strategic anchors and thematic goals, assessing the performance of key employees, discussing competitive threats, etc. The timing of these meetings is not really negotiable; usually they may last up to one or two days.

EXECUTION

“Oh, reminds me of our *caffice*, (coffee outside the office), when you made it a must for all the leaders, for hanging out related to work issues, challenges, and opportunities,” Jose said.



KNOWLEDGE CAPTURE AND STORAGE

When it comes to project storing and sharing the lessons learned before, during, and after, it is essential that these records be stored in a safe place in the organization for future reference. This what we call at SEWA knowledge management (KM).

“What is SEWA KMS?” asked Afra.

I answered, “KMS stands for knowledge management System. In fact, KM emerged from the world of academia and became a burning issue for business leaders. Practically, KMS involves identifying and mapping an organization’s intellectual assets, generating new knowledge, making the knowledge available to *everyone*, sharing best practices, and using technology to assist it. SEWA is in dire need of a KMS, primarily because we want to foster continuous improvement, ensure 24/7 access to information, improve productivity, create an innovative learning organization by linking knowledge, and create sustainability by promoting organizational communication.”

“That’s a pretty long list!” Moza said.

I said, “To ensure that SEWA KMS is real, effective, and not merely symbolic, I have created the SEWA knowledge management model to support our project management department.”

My office manager Omar requested my team to assemble in the Knowledge X room, as I wanted to wrap the model session in that room.

Knowledge X Room

Knowledge X is the room where sharing tacit knowledge takes place—the knowledge that employees acquire through their work experiences, successes, and challenges in SEWA. The English letter “X” also denotes the multiplication symbol of math. At SEWA, our ultimate objective is to become a continuous innovative learning organization. The main purpose of the Knowledge X room is to connect employees (in any field or discipline) with each other so they can discuss their work, learn from one another, and achieve improvements in results. Sharing knowledge, especially experiential knowledge, is a key ingredient in innovation. Knowledge exchange is essential to achieve continual learning from experience and apply that learning to improve our work.

“This stage is the last, as well as one of the most important stages, of the SEWA project management model – the final project documentation. In essence, it is the closeout stage of SEWA’s projects; that is, the stage of wrapping things up and handing over the ownership to others in the organization or stakeholders,” I said.

The closeout document answers three important questions:

1. What should we keep doing?
2. What should we stop doing?
3. What should we start doing?

“Ladies and gentlemen, the answers are going to be vital, and simply jotting them down on a piece of paper would not be justifiable. The immense knowledge deserves to be archived so that it can later be pulled out of the archived library/system and put to use. After all, we cannot anticipate the value someone else will find in our knowledge, can we? In light of this, we need a comprehensive and systematic documentation system,” I said.

“I love studying knowledge management and the ways knowledge can be shared and transferred across the globe,” Fatima, the chief SHEngineering officer, said.

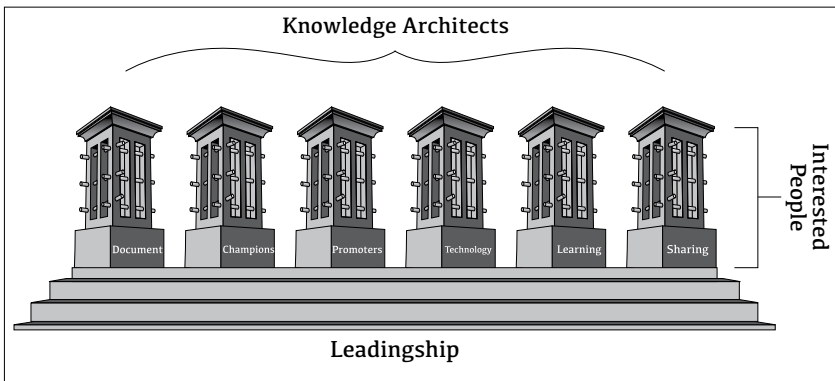
“I would like to direct you all to NASA’s chief knowledge officer’s website. You can benchmark and download a couple of interesting publications pertaining to our pressing need. The NASA knowledge journal may give you a great head start, while the NASA knowledge toolbox contains tools, resources, and information for individuals and teams to enhance their knowledge-sharing efforts on real-life projects and programs,” I said.

SEWA Knowledge Management System

“Now let me invite you to a short journey under the theme ‘The SEWA Six Pillars of knowledge management.’ But before that, let me share with you what Peter Drucker asserts:

“The most important contribution management needs to make in the 21st century is to increase the productivity of knowledge work and knowledge worker.”

“And this takes us to the first step of our journey. Let me explain it to you all. The SEWA project management model is expected to reap huge benefits, and a wealth of information will be gained from managing our projects leading us to create a good KM model. Look up and behold our bespoke SEWA knowledge management model pillars,” I added.



Below is a brief summary of the six pillars:

1. *Document*: To conduct lessons-learned studies to examine what went well and what didn't. Through this type of analysis, the wisdom of experience is transferred back to the project organization, which, in turn, will help future project teams in improving their performance.
2. *Champions*: Champions encompass talented employees with a focused vision and the aptitude to align knowledge management with business tactics, ushering strong and dedicated leadership to SEWA. SEWA KM champions play an instrumental role in managing the efficient functioning of the SEWA knowledge toolbox.
3. *Promoters*: The promoters develop, promote, and facilitate organizational knowledge while they also create, collaborate, and align the operational processes and SEWA strategy with the KM framework.
4. *Technology*: Technology is the main tool that will leverage the SEWA KM framework. All technical solutions will add value to our processes, while the lack of them contribute to failure. Knowing this, it is clear to see that technology is clearly fundamental and that having the latest machines and programs is a must.
5. *Learning*: The best tools and strategies could fall flat if the desire to learn and acquire knowledge is missing. Learning is a never-ending process here at SEWA, and I have emphasized the importance of education by making it an important pillar of SEWA's KM.

“Whoa, wait a moment! Didn't we celebrate ‘Learning at Work Week’ this year?” Fatima, the chief SHEngineering officer, asked.

“Yes, you got it on point,” Syeda, the chief knowledge officer, replied.

“I don't remember hearing about anything of the sort. Did I miss it?” Hassan, the chief flexitricity officer, asked.

The rest of the team gasped.

“Oh, I know, I was on my annual vacation during that time,” Hassan chuckled, embarrassed.

“Syeda, why don’t you share with all of us here the interesting story of SEWA’s ‘Learning at Work Week’ celebration?” I smiled and signalled at her.

“Thank you, sir. SEWA marked ‘Learning at Work Week’ with creative, vibrant, and engaging campaigns and activities that inspired our colleagues to learn through life and promote learning cultures at work,” said Syeda.

“Did we have any specific theme?” Ghada, the chief greenification officer inquired.

Syeda responded, “The national theme for ‘Learning at Work Week 2019’ was ‘Shaping the Future.’ We collaborated with the ‘Campaign for Learning’ that provided resources, activity ideas, promotional materials, and workshops to help us design a brilliant ‘Learning at Work Week’ at SEWA and bring the theme to life. In fact, we will be celebrating ‘Learning at Work Week’ in 2020 from May 18th to May 24th,” she added.

“Wow, count us all in, Syeda!” the rest of the project team unanimously.

“Sure thing!” Syeda responded with glee.

I was amused with the spirit of my team. “Now, let’s move on to the most important pillar of SEWA knowledge management,” I announced.

The team looked at me with excitement.

“Really, what is it?” Fatima asked.

“Well, the answer lies in one of my well-known quotes,” I said.

“Of course! I know with certainty which famous quote you are talking about,” Kumar, the chief design-thinking officer exclaimed, “which you keep saying from time to time:

“Knowledge is power, if applied and shared.”

“You are correct,” I said.

I continued, “Hence, the sixth pillar is ‘sharing.’ Let’s discover it together.”

6. *Sharing*: Knowledge should be *free flowing*. Hindering knowledge from being shared with each other is detrimental to any organization. In light of this, I consider knowledge as wealth, which multiplies when shared and collaborated. The more you give, the more you get back.

“Short and sweet,” Fatima said.

I looked at the team and said out loud, “Your knowledge and experience is worth a million only if you share it with the world. Knowledge begets knowledge.”

They nodded in agreement.

The Safeguards

To further safeguard our SEWA knowledge management model, three safeguards are needed:

1. Leadingship
2. Knowledge Architects
3. Interested People

“Leadingship! Did I hear that right? Sir, do you mean leadership?” asked May.

“Let me explain one-by-one,” I said.

1. Leadingship

“Is a vital element. It forms the solid base upon which the six pillars stand. Leadingship is about leading the interested people towards the true north in order to realize the common shared vision. Leadingship means authenticity and passion in charge. This will help pull us into a new and very exciting direction,” I said.

2. Knowledge Architects

I continued, “On the other hand, there are also good people around who like to create a difference and beautify the SEWA KM framework; we give the term Knowledge Architects to such individuals.

Knowledge Architects are important because they help the organization adapt and swiftly reconfigure the internal processes and resources to meet new challenges. SEWA knowledge architects are responsible for the implementation of SEWA knowledge management and help to identify, organize, and provide access to the information when needed.”

The team listened in pin-drop silence.

“Next, we need ‘interested people,’” I said.

3. Interested people

“Success can be only be achieved if all the members of the project team give their best. Interested people are the essential element of pursuit here in SEWA. If genuine interest is missing, we should bid goodbye to the employee right at the beginning,” I added.

May raised her hand and said, “You are absolutely right, sir. I remember you wrote in depth in of your books about the energy vampires. Could you tell us more about them?”

“Ohh, gosh. I wrote about energy vampires in the *SEWA Brand Turnaround and Rejuvenation*. Interestingly, the emotional vampires aren’t the mythical characters from the famous American series *The Vampire Diaries*. I am talking about living human beings who suck all the positive energy out of us to fuel their relentless hunger for negativity, leaving us drained, exhausted, and unhappy. These are the authentic predatory, mind-clouding, shape-shifting creatures of darkness. Whatever you call them, emotional/energy vampires, energy suckers, or toxic people, they can wreak havoc on your life and projects if you don’t have effective strategies to deal with them. The reason we need interested people is because we inevitably encounter *emotional vampires* in life,” I said.

“Thank you, sir, for bringing this up. We couldn’t agree more,” Ghada said in a solemn tone.

“I am done here!” I said with a smile.



THE WAY FORWARD

“It was an impressive presentation!” the whole team said loudly.

“Let me give you some perspective here. Remember what Thomas Henry said once:

“The great end of life is not knowledge, but action.”

“Oh, this is what is called ‘intellectual capital,’” Hassan said excitedly.

We moved on to chat about SEWA’s current project updates. I advised my HR manager to begin with a crash workshop on the SEWA project management model. I knew that if this model was ‘dragged-and-dropped’ in the project team’s mind, then we could go sky-high.

“Thank you, sir, without your wise counsel and intellectual and insightful explanation of the SEWA project management model, I wonder where we would be,” Syeda, the chief knowledge officer, added.

“The SEWA project management model will surely make a world of difference in SEWA’s projects,” Afra, the chief efficienology officer, confirmed.

“Thank you very much, sir, for this amazing and informative presentation. There’s a lot to take home today. We are fortunate to be handpicked by you as the core project leadership team and to learn the tricks of the trade to execute SEWA’s projects using your SEWA project management model,” Syeda said.

“Thank you so much. Indeed, I feel like I have hit the jackpot. Each and every slide had words of wisdom,” Ahmed Babiker responded.

“However, you will be coming back soon with a longer presentation. Won’t you, sir?” Syeda said with a chuckle.

“Is there another presentation coming up soon? What’s it all about?” Ghada, the chief greenification officer, asked.

“Well, let me reveal a part of the secret, not the full secret,” I said with a bright smile on my face. “Soon, we will be launching our SEWA Vision 2025. To know the rest of the news,” I added, “you will have to wait till our 6th Sharjah Energy Meet, which will be held on Wednesday, January 8, 2020.”

“As I wrap up the presentation today,” I concluded, “on December 31, 2019, and as we embark on the New Year today, I would like to extend my best wishes to all of you with greater success than ever before.”



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As Toni Morrison famously stated, “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

The book you hold in your hands is the kind of book I always wanted to read but couldn’t find. So, I decided to pen it myself. However, as they say, it takes two flints to make a fire. This book would not have seen the light of the day without the fantastic people I will mention on this page. Here, I would like to thank a few of the many people who directly or indirectly helped me conceptualize this work. I would like to thank the great heroes and outperformers of SEWA for supporting the idea of this book from day one.

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There is a Malayalam proverb that says, “One can pay back the loan of gold, but one dies forever in debt to those who are kind.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Rashid Alleem is ranked third among the 25 most influential CEOs in GCC and is considered one of the 100 most influential CEOs in the Middle East. Recently, the Academic College of Oxford, United Kingdom, honored Dr. Rashid Alleem with the title of “Honorary Professor” in recognition of his scientific, administrative and humanitarian efforts, and contributions, especially in the field of sustainable development. He is a passionate writer; an environmentalist; a sought-after thought leader; the creator of CRITICAL Thinking, a unique blend of “critical and lateral” thinking; and an internationally respected transformational leader. The founder of Alleem Knowledge Center, Dr. Alleem is a dynamic leader who has worked with prestigious governmental, semi-governmental, and nonprofit organizations. He is an entrepreneur par excellence with a flair for effective, strategic decision-making by means of innovative thinking. Dr. Rashid was recognized as “The Knowledge Ambassador of the UAE” by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum—the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of the Emirate of Dubai—and as “Environmentalist of the Year 2012” by the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad.

Dr. Alleem earned a Ph.D. from the University of Salford, in Manchester, UK. Being a “sustainovationalist,” he has received five honorary doctorates from different universities: Atlantic International University (USA), in recognition of his achievements in the socioeconomic fields; Somalia National University, for his humanitarian services; American Global International University (USA), for his global business contributions and numerous academic achievements; Indian Peace University, from which he received a Doctorate in Philosophy for his exceptional contributions, dedication, and social services to society; and Doctor of Philosophy (D. Phil) from Amity University, in recognition of his exceptional vision, deep commitment to the en-

vironment, professionalism and direction in the pursuit of excellence; his strategic vision and inspirational leadership in steering his organization towards continuous growth and dedication to the good of humanity.

Dr. Alleem was recently recognized as The Global Green Ambassador by DMG. Under his leadership, SEWA received the Voluntary Cancellation Certificate for excellence in energy-saving and the reduction of CO2 emissions by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2017. He was bestowed with the Friend of Singapore Sustainability Award 2017 by the government of Singapore, and he became a member of the advisory board of the Singapore World Water Council. He has received the prestigious title of “The Ambassador of Peace & Happiness in the Arab World” by Voice of Kerala (VOK) Radio Station.

As a highly sought-after keynote speaker, presenter, and teacher, Dr. Alleem is well-known for delivering compelling and practical messages to audiences of more than 200,000 people per annum, including at some of the largest regional and international venues.

Last but not least, he is one of the most interviewed and published charismatic media personalities in the region. A prolific writer both in English and Arabic, Dr. Rashid Alleem is the author of several books on management and leadership. His newest book, *The SEWA Way*, showcases 15 winning principles, providing a roadmap for achieving success both on an organizational and a personal scale. Aiming to improve social, economic, and environmental living conditions worldwide and helping to improve the quality of life for hundreds of millions who have not yet seen the benefits of sustainable development and inclusive growth, he has written four books on the topic of sustainability: *My Green Journey in Hamriyah*; *Sustainability: The Fourth Wave of Economy*; *I Am Committed: 17 Global Goals*; and *Alleem Sustainable Development Goals*.

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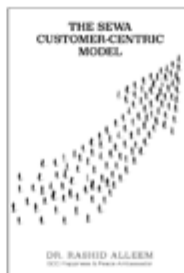
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