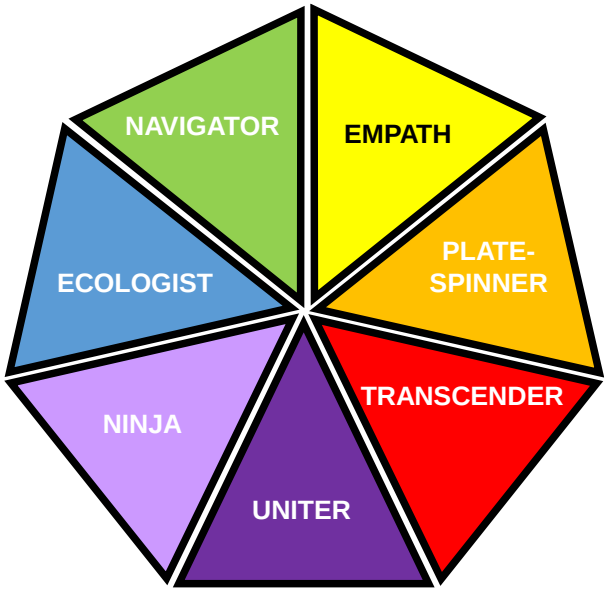
NEPTUNE: The Seven Habits Of Highly Effective (Innovation) Project Managers



I spent the first fifteen years of my working life at Rolls-Royce, about three years of which was effectively in a programme management role at the R&D end of the spectrum. In the aerospace world, R&D cycles tend to be long, the technology is highly complicated, and it is incredibly easy to spend enormous amounts of money in a very short amount of time. Although I didn't know it at the time, looking back, my experience doing the job represented a classic example of 'think of someone with an extreme version of your problem and they're highly likely to have found a solution'. We were the extreme version. But because I didn't know it yet, when we started Systematic Innovation and began working with innovators in other industries their apparent lack of ability to manage projects came as something of a shock. Especially innovation projects.

The core of the problem I now see is that the Project/Product/Programme Management educators of the world have no idea what managing R&D projects entails. Not in the real world at least. Look at the curricula they teach and what you see is the naïve assumption that all project/product/programmes are the same and can be managed in the same ways. And so students are shown how to construct and operate a Gantt Chart, they learn how to build a risk management plan, they learn how to motivate unwilling team members. And so on. Nothing wrong with any of these things if you never have to actually use them in a real project/product/programme setting. If a project is an Operational Excellence/Continuous-Improvement non-step-change type, some of it might actually help deliver the project on time, on budget and to specification. Or, two out of three at least. That seems to be the global view in Operational Excellence World. But, any readers that know anything about our Innovation Capability Maturity Model (ICMM) will know that whatever happens to deliver success in Operational Excellence World is almost invariably going to fail in Innovation World. A dominant reason being that in Operational Excellence World, we expect people to follow the accepted rules, whereas in Innovation World, the job is often about breaking rules. That's 'breaking rules' in the accepted entrepreneur's sense of breaking them in order to find better ways of doing things.

Consequently, one of the biggest contributors to the 98% failure rate of innovation projects is the fact that the project/product/programme managers have been taught to use the

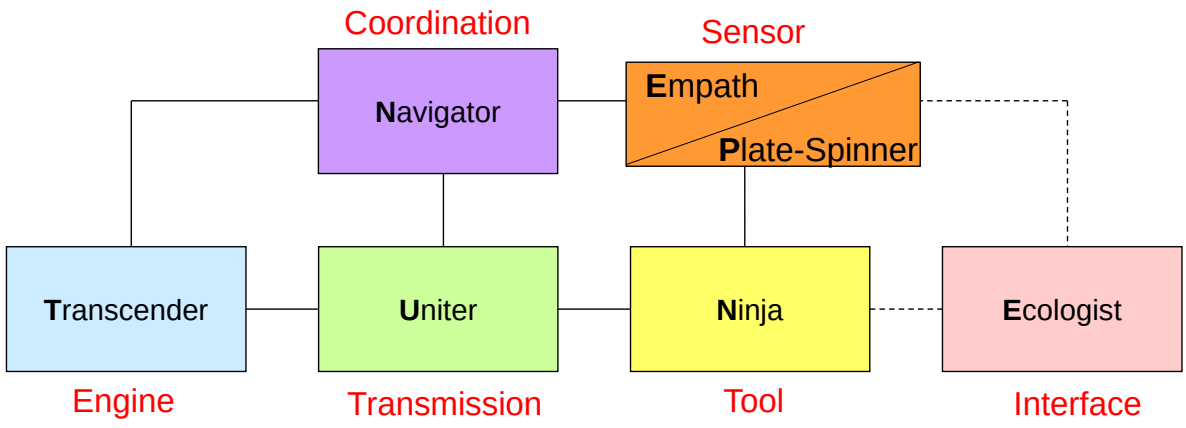
wrong tools, follow the wrong rules, measure the wrong things, treat people the wrong way and head in the wrong direction. Apart from that, everything is fine.

For a long time, I've had on my jobs-list 'write innovation programme management book'. I'm still not sure what the title should be, but I've been pretty certain about the sub-title from the beginning, 'the 98% of programme management skills they don't teach you on a programme management course'.

The book is still a long way away (or rather is too far down the book-writing priority list), but we've had occasion over the course of the last decade to teach a lot of the contents to innovation teams inside a number of our client organisations. A lot of them are looking for something proprietary. Which usually means taking the various universal principles of managing innovation projects right and configuring them into a cunning, easy-to-remember internal acronym. Which in turn means I can't then use it anywhere else. So, here, finally, are the self-same universal principles, but now with a new acronym that doesn't infringe other client-proprietary ones.

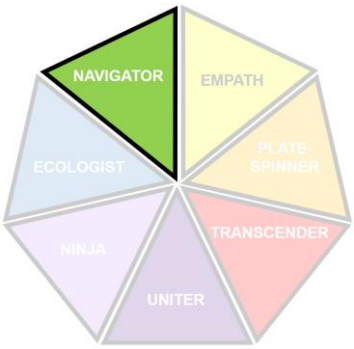
Ideally, project or product or programme management requiring a 'system', the Law Of System Completeness tells me there should be six of these universal principles. Or twelve. Or a higher multiple of six. Instead, I've ended up with seven. In part to attach the overall story to the 'Seven Habits' meme created by Steven Covey, in part because that's how many colours there in a rainbow so they can be easily colour-coded and a rainbow makes for a good first project management metaphor, and in part to tap into the human short-term memory ability to remember no more than seven different things at any one time.

Enter, NEPTUNE. First up in its Law Of System Completeness form:

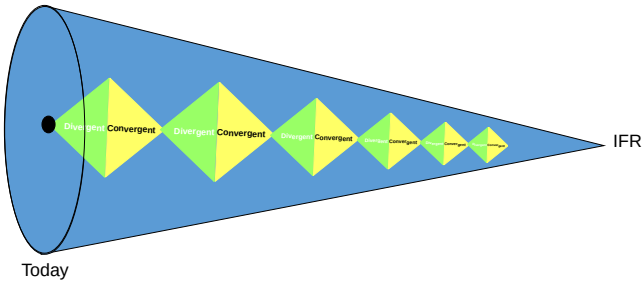


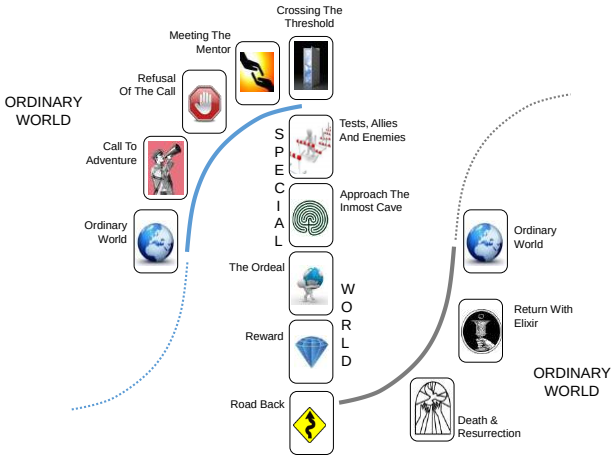
The 'seventh' principle in this model arrives by splitting the sensor element of the overall system into two parts: one covering what we might consider the intangible/emotion-related 'Empath' measurement aspects of a project team, and the other – 'plate-spinner' – covering the tangible measurement elements.

Let's have a look at each of the seven elements in acronym-sequence:

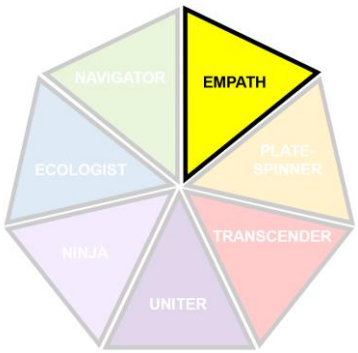


The Coordination element of the overall project management system is all about knowing where a project/product/programme is going. In keeping with the tangible/intangible split within any project, the Navigator's job essentially reduces to two maps of the innovation world, both of which will be familiar to TRIZ/SI users and regular readers of the ezine. The first concerns the tangible evolution of all things in a direction towards an Ideal Final Result. Here the project manager's duty is to ensure that the project is heading in the right – 'increasing value' – direction and is going to deliver a 'more ideal' solution than all of the other competing solutions on the same convergent path to IFR.



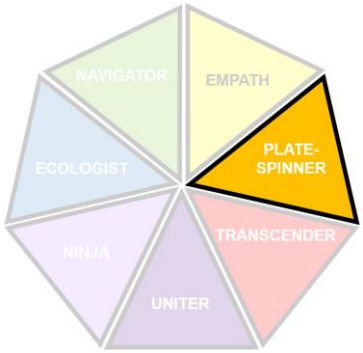


The intangible side of the Navigator's story then concerns the Hero's Journey and making sure we know where we are in that Journey. The big idea here being that when we know where we are, we know what to expect in the future.

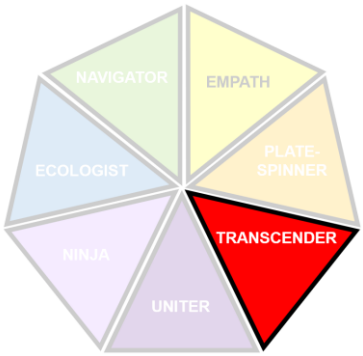


An Empath is 'a person with a paranormal ability to perceive the mental or emotional state of another individual'. Innovation projects will inevitably involve a whole bunch of different stakeholders, spanning a range from team members and suppliers, to customers, to complementors, to regulators, to bosses and sponsors. A good project manager is able to gauge the emotional state of each stakeholder and ensure that they are all perceiving a

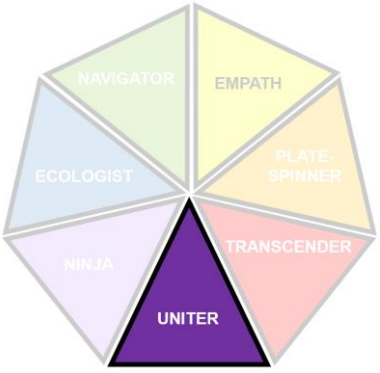
win and continuing desire to support the project. Easy enough to say. In all probability the most difficult of the seven elements to manage well. Which is where PanSensic has been designed to come to a project manager's assistance.



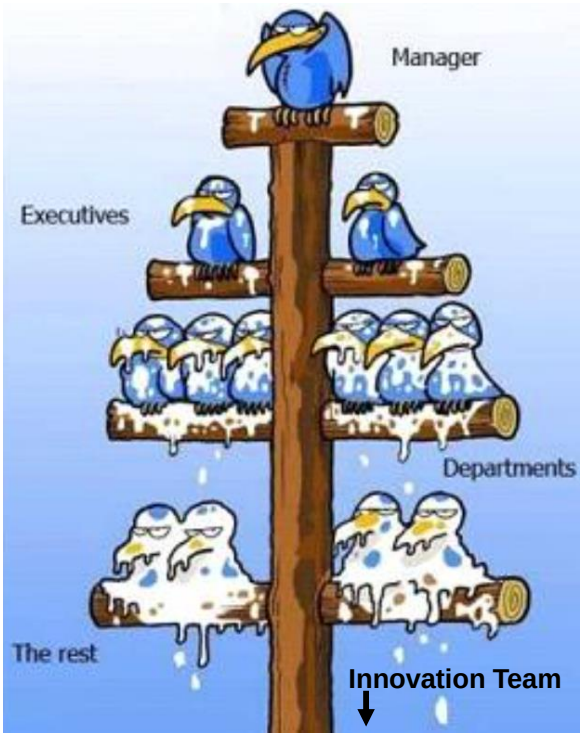
The tangible side of the Sensor element of the project management system is all about recognising the need to keep lots of plates spinning. Success with innovation projects is, first and foremost, about managing unknowns (Reference 1) and successive cycles of divergent and convergent problem definition and solution generation activity. Particularly in divergent phases, the oft-used expression in SI project teams is 'diverge until it hurts'. Which, I think, gets right to the heart of the Plate-Spinner's role: maximising the number of plates (ideas, clues, problems, contradictions, untapped resources, Evolution Potential, etc) that we can keep spinning without letting any of the others topple.



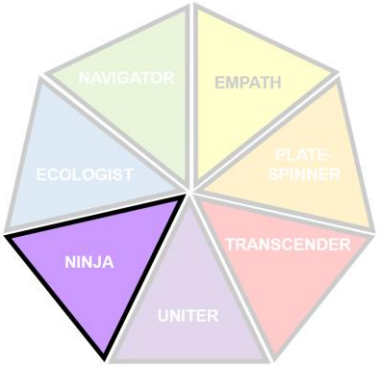
The Transcender is the Engine of the project management system. It is the thing that recognises that innovation derives from the discovery and resolution of conflicts and contradictions. And that the way to resolve contradictions – per the whole of the TRIZ research findings – is to transcend them and not to make trade-off and compromise solutions. In a project context, there will be contradictions everywhere. Again, in the tangible world, it is about revealing the contradictions that, once transcended, will deliver the 'wow' solutions desired by customers, and on the intangible side, it is about revealing the emotional contradictions present in and around the project stakeholders. In particular recognising the many 'right-versus-right' situations where two or more different stakeholders hold views that are both correct and in conflict with one another. The Transcender understands that these conflicts need to be solved by means other than the usual method of scrabbling for an uncomfortable middle ground between the two. Transcending contradictions means escaping the 'or' and discovering the 'and'.



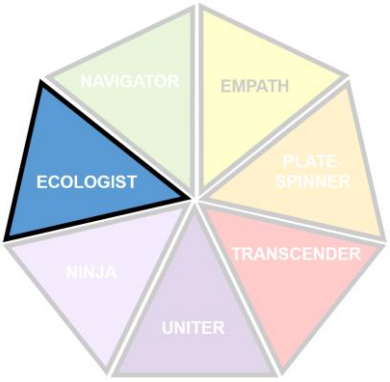
In the first version of these seven habits, the Transmission part of the system was called ‘Shield’ and the picture-speaks-a-thousand-words image used to illustrate what the shield was all about showed a bulletproof-vest with a Superman logo on it. The accompanying words then talked about being prepared to take a bullet for the team. The bullet being most likely to come from a gun fired by people in the Operational Excellence part of the organisation. People whose job is to make today’s revenue, and often see R&D projects as things that spend too much of that revenue and rarely give anything in return. Sadly, there is no ‘S’ in NEPTUNE and so the next preferred label for this element in the system was Umbrella. In the sense that an umbrella is also a shield. Usually a shield from rain and other adverse weather, but more metaphorically useful in the innovation context, it offers a shield from the fall-out from flocks of Operational Excellence seagulls flying overhead. Or perhaps, better still, protection from the frequent fallout from Operational Excellence hierarchies where the innovator, irrespective of impressive job title, is most likely to be viewed as the person at the bottom…



Market research has subsequently revealed that some managers don’t think ‘Umbrella’ is serious enough. Hence, we end up extending the metaphor one step further and recognise that one of the tasks of the project manager is to Unite everyone under cover of the umbrella.

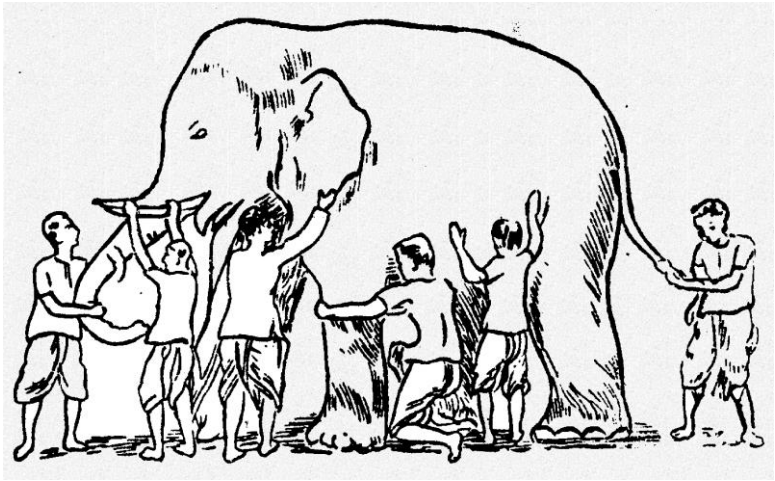


Turtles aside, Ninja (忍者) were a type of Japanese warrior who specialised in unconventional warfare such as infiltration, sabotage and assassination during the age of the samurai. Another name for ninja is "shinobi", meaning "those who act in stealth". Ninja employed inventive, counter-intuitive tactics to take opponents out by surprise. Which all seems to fit nicely as the Engine part of the project management system. Due to their unorthodox methods which contradicted the way of the warrior (bushido), the ninja were not credited with the same honour as the (Operational Excellence) Samurai. That also fits. Especially in organisations where the ICMM Level is below three. Ninjas, meanwhile, continue to feature prominently in Japanese legend and folklore, where they are associated with legendary abilities such as invisibility, walking on water and control over natural elements. All metaphorical traits consistent with leading innovation teams through the inevitable periods of complexity and chaos of any project.



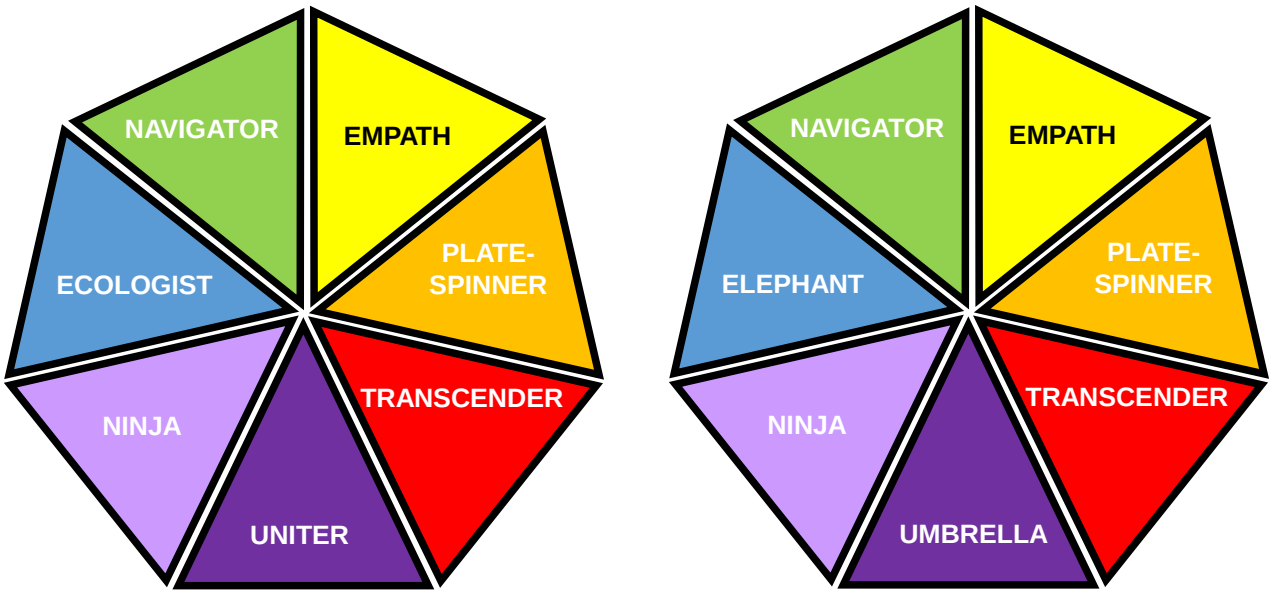
Ecologists study the relationships between living things and their environment. Ecologists often have to study and explain how human actions affect other living things and their environment. This is the Interface part of the project management system, and as such is intended to convey the need for the manager to be cognisant of what's happening in the outside world. Here's another of the NEPTUNE elements that has also suffered a little from seriousness-syndrome. I still prefer the original 'Elephant' version of the last letter of the acronym. In part because 'elephant' is more likely to be remembered. But mainly because – and perhaps we're back to tangibles and intangibles again – when it comes to interfacing with the world outside the innovation project team, the project manager needs to be keeping a constant eye out for elephants in the room. The unspoken things that everyone is thinking about, but nobody dare voice. The project managers job is to call out these elephants.

Not much Ecology in that metaphor, but there definitely is in the first one that prompted me to want to use Elephant. Here I'm talking about the famous Indian story of the six blind people standing around an elephant and being asked to describe what it is they can feel in front of them…



One person thinks it is a spear, another a fan, another a snake, another a wall, another a brush. The moral of the story is that there may be some truth to what someone says. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes not because they may have different perspective which we may not agree too. So, rather than arguing like the blind men, we should say, “Maybe you have your reasons.” From the project management perspective, Elephant is the part of the system that reminds us that a) the job of the project manager is to recognise the differing perspectives of different team members, and, b) more importantly, see the elephant for what it actually is.

Part of me likes the ‘Umbrella’ and ‘Elephant’ versions of the NEPTUNE acronym. They don’t sound as serious as the ‘uniter’ and ‘ecologist’ words, which can be a problem in some worlds, but in many ways, I think they make for better metaphors for the project manager’s role in Innovation World. And they’re certainly more memorable. Time will tell which of the variants gets to survive. Here are the two together in a crude attempt at making a first experiment with a friendly, ezine-reading, audience:



So, finally, why NEPTUNE? Well, apart from the fact that the name fits with the intended meaning of the seven system elements…

…Neptune was the chariot-piloting, Roman god of waters and seas. He was a god who controlled winds and storms. Also known as Neptunus Equester, he was further recognised as a god of horses and horsemanship. Both of which seem to have another strong metaphorical link to the management of innovation projects. Projects where the seas are often turbulent and unpredictable, and, almost invariably these days, full of competitors racing towards the same elusive victory.

Also consistent with the metaphor, Neptune could also summon winds and storms. By roiling the seas and delivering crushing waves, sailors that failed to follow Neptune's advice were likely to lose their ships and be sent to a watery grave. Approximately 98% by current standards.

Neptune is also usually depicted wielding a trident—a three-pronged thrusting weapon used by Mediterranean fishermen for centuries. The trident offers us a final element to our project/product/programme management metaphor, one that brings us full circle back to the Operational Excellence version of the project management job. Each tine of the trident representing one of the three ultimate iron-triangle desires of any project – to be on time, to be on schedule, and to be on specification. Except, of course, in the real world, the trident has to have a handle. A handle that tells us, in Innovation World, we only deliver the three requirements if we also successfully get a grip on risk:

Reference

1) SI EZine, 'Managing The (4H) Unknowns', Issue 171, June 2016.