

By Tom Richert, RisingTerrain LLC

## Introduction

In their book *Wiring the Winning Organization* Gene Kim and Steve Spear describe the leadership capabilities present in organizations that perform far better than counterparts in their fields. They describe these capabilities as the social circuitry that supports the people performing the work. Winning organizations focus on creating the conditions that allow people to solve complex problems and move the work of the organization forward.

Using three mechanisms Gene and Steve define as Slowification, Simplification, and Amplification leaders help people navigate out of the “danger zone” into the “winning zone.”

- Danger Zone: Problems are hidden, difficult to control, and involve high levels of complexity.
- Winning Zone: Problems are quickly obvious, understandable, and able to be addressed.

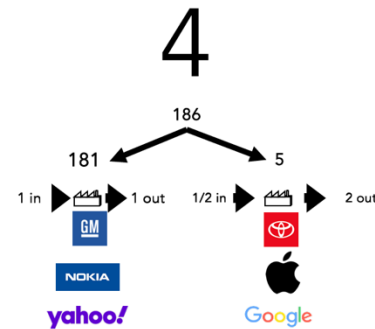
**Steve Spear has in several presentations made a well-grounded case for asserting that these mechanisms are observed in organizations that outperform their counterparts by a factor of four!**

Case studies in *Wiring the Winning Organization* illustrate how the three mechanisms produce these results. These mechanisms are equally applicable to projects and portfolios of projects. They provide a leadership framework people responsible for capital projects should adopt to leverage the technical skills of project team

members throughout the delivery of the project.

I have observed that in successful projects this wiring of the social circuitry framework is at play in three fundamental leadership disciplines I describe as Guardianship, Strategy, and Coordination.

Everything the same but for outcomes...



Source: Steven J. Spear <https://www.lean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Steve-Spear.pdf>

## Guardianship

Guardianship here is defined as defending the project team from forces, internal and external, that disrupt and impede progress, while equipping them to be successful in their individual and collective work. Comparing project delivery to taking a journey through an unknown territory, guardianship is equipping the project team with the provisions they need to complete that journey unharmed. Core provisions include the following.

- Vision. This includes values, purpose, and a clear definition of the mission of the project. The vision must be clear, communicated often, and meaningful to people on the project team.
- Relationships. This includes the contractual and physical space

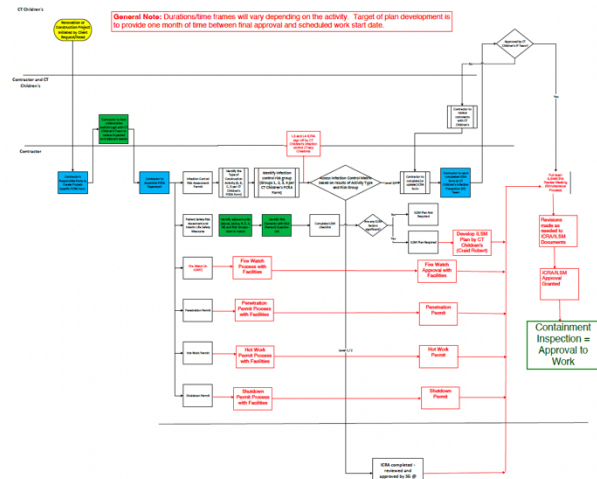
methodologies implemented to ideally facilitate high levels of collaboration.

- Systems. These are the clearly defined and communicated processes that project team members use to plan and coordinate work, identify challenges, and innovate solutions.

I write about Vision and Relationships in other articles. For this article I am emphasizing Systems as a key part of Guardianship. Executive leaders should take an acute interest in the implementation, management, and improvement of robust process systems, with Slowification, Simplification, and Amplification in mind.

Some process systems are methodologies intended to promote steady flows of work. Examples of systems include the Last Planner System® for planning, coordinating, and learning for work, and Choosing By Advantages for decisionmaking. Other systems, some less methodical, include those for addressing submittals, requests for information, the management of material flow, the storage of information, promoting team health, making improvements to work, and making changes in scope.

Documenting systems, whether as checklists or flow charts, so everyone shares a common and easily accessible understanding, supports *Slowification*. Relying on memory when executing a process builds cognitive load, especially when out-of-sequence process steps lead to stress via rework and missed commitments. A clearly documented process flow allows the mind to slow, and complete tasks more proficiently and confidently.



*Process Map for an Infection Control Risk Assessment*

In the Guardianship role, leaders clearly define the systems being implemented, the standards to which they are implemented, and how the implementation is to be improved throughout the duration of the project. Without process systems that have defined standards subject to improvement project team members are often metaphorically separated, and so divided risk being conquered.

This continuous definition, communication, testing, learning, and redefinition of work through systems is important leadership work and at the core of executive leader responsibilities. Through systems leaders build and enhance an awareness of the health of the project, allowing them to intervene where most effective without becoming entangled in fighting reactive battles.

This highlights the importance of integrating the *Amplification* mechanism in all process systems. An Amplification mechanism clearly identifies when there is a problem requiring attention. This often means that systems

should include measurements for monitoring the performance of the system itself, in addition to other importance performance indicators.

### Strategy

Strategy is the course that the project team charts for the project delivery journey. A common mistake is to substitute a detailed plan for strategy. The detailed plan, typically a critical path method schedule displayed as a Gantt chart, provides the illusion of a certain path forward. The challenge is that most projects progress in uncharted terrain encountering unforeseeable and possibly dangerous events and challenges that quickly render the detailed plan irrelevant. The plan's complexity is its central weakness.

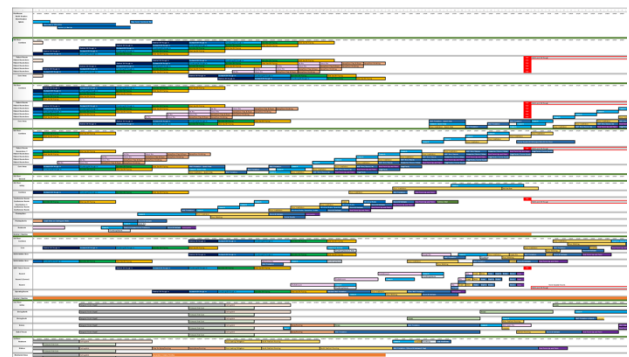
A project strategy needs to allow for the unforeseeable and therefore needs to set direction based on milestones understood to lead toward the final objective of the project delivery journey. A good strategy expresses what will ultimately be a complex series of steps through a simple illustration of how the major components of the trip relate to one another. Each component has for itself a defined mission with systems appropriate for the terrain involved. This is the benefit of employing the *Simplification* mechanism.

Last Planner System protocols implemented authentically as part of a broader lean design and construction project provide a framework for developing strategy before planning. At the project milestone and phase planning level project teams are directed to think more generally about the work required to reach key milestones they define. In milestone planning the focus is on defining the phases

of work required to design and construct a project. In phase planning people determine task sequences and durations, with any calendar dates assigned provisional and subject to coordination changes. This high-level work organization removes unnecessary complexity from the planning process. It is an initial step toward Simplification.

*Wiring the Winning Organization* identified three techniques employed as a part of Simplification.

- Incrementation. Identifying clear steps that build on each other, completing each step successfully before progressing to the next.
- Modularization. Organizing work into loosely coupled modules. The loosely-couple nature is important, as it simplifies coordination complexity across the organization.
- Linearization. Partitioning work into sequential workflows to reduce the amount of interdependent work.



*Overlapping Phase Plans Resulting from a Strategy of Modularization, Incrementation, and Linearization*

A *Modularization* step I recommend to teams is to identify within design and construction phases the major workstreams within phases. For example, the construction of patient rooms in a hospital has a different

workstream than that for operating rooms. The mix of trade operations and durations of common operations is different for each. Industry critical path method schedules often tightly couple the work across many parts of a project. Conversely, project modules should be loosely coupled to further reduce the complexity of planning and coordinating the project.

This Modularization of project work, ideally encompassing the management of design, construction, and the project supply chain, allows the team to develop and communicate a coherent project strategy, robust enough to instruct forward progress and resilient enough to address most of what is unforeseeable.

Within the modules it is helpful to use Incrementation through pull planning to determine how the work will progress. As part of this work design Linearization can be employed to define a clear sequence of work. When a construction module has multiple zones, such as the example of space in a hospital patient room module, it is useful to balance the workflow, so all increments of work move forward at the same pace.

### Coordination

With strategy the charting of a course for a project journey, coordination is the moment-to-moment navigation required to adjust individual efforts to reach a milestone. Coordination involves the active orchestration of individual effort into a unified force that moves the project forward. Dozens of continuous actions by individuals and small groups must be coordinated so every

person has what they need to perform their role on the project.

This requires systems for communicating requests, promises, handoffs, and other necessary information quickly and clearly to allow for progress with minimal misalignment between team members.

The make ready, weekly work planning, and daily huddle elements of the Last Planner System include the primary coordination skills supporting lean design and construction teams. Authentically performed, these elements employ the Slowification mechanism. Slowification moves project team members out of a danger zone into to a winning zone for identifying constraints, refining planning, and learning from coordination successes and breakdowns.



*Weekly Coordination Meetings are an Example of Slowification so People in the Field Can Work Quickly with Confidence*

Slowification is a key protective mechanism, and leaders need to ensure that project teams are not making critical coordination decisions in the danger zone. We need to design oscillation between fast thinking and slow thinking in all project coordination systems for those systems to be effective at supporting and protecting project teams.

**Summary**

One purpose of this article is to broadly define the fundamental project leadership disciplines of Guardianship, Strategy, and Coordination. Within each of these disciplines reside sets of practice skills that support individual and group project delivery capabilities. The learning that results from developing these skills will result in a more capable project team and enhanced professional growth for individuals on the team.

Another purpose of the article is to highlight the importance of adopting mechanisms demonstrated to support operational excellence across other industries to how we lead projects. In *Wiring the Winning Organization* several case studies support the

application of common mechanisms that lead to excellence in a wide variety of settings. While I highlighted different mechanisms in sections of this article, all three, Slowification, Simplification, and Amplification, should be applied to each of the three project leadership disciplines.

Recalling Steve Spear's assertion referenced at the beginning of this article for these mechanisms being present in organizations outperforming counterparts by a factor of four, a final purpose of this article is to leave you with the following challenge.

**How can you apply these disciplines and mechanisms on your projects to learn how to outperform other projects by a factor of four?**

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**About RisingTerrain**

*RisingTerrain LLC is a capital project performance consultancy equipping project teams with the executive skills required to lead and rapidly deliver quality projects at reduced costs. RisingTerrain serves clients throughout the U.S., supporting healthcare, technology, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, institutional, multifamily, and government projects. The firm continually builds its capabilities, through the introduction of leadership and project performance practices to client project leaders.*

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