Launch Pad

Deliberate practice—Pursuing perfect product launch

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It is easy for any stakeholder to specify the outcomes desired at product launch. But figuring out how to achieve those outcomes within specific project constraints is more difficult. This article examines how the interplay of explicit coordination, implicit coordination, and deliberate practice can be fine-tuned to improve product launch outcomes.

Often, a new product development project begins with a list of the desired outcomes. Unfortunately, desired outcomes can be thwarted by factors outside the control of the team. For example, the emergence of a new competitor could derail a desired outcome of selling a specific number of products in the six months following product introduction.

Instead of pursuing the desired outcome directly, new product development teams should create goals that they have the power to achieve.

You are what you practice

Within many organizations, business as usual is punctuated with episodic events designed to bring about improvement. Unfortunately, an isolated event such as a single workshop or an idea from a popular article or book is usually insufficient to change the performance of an organization. Likewise, incorporating one new tool into the workflow is usually insufficient. Typically, the novelty dissipates and the organization reverts to the previous level of performance.

An organization is defined by the priorities it sets and the intensity of how it implements those priorities.

Deliberate practice

Frequently, deliberate practice is an approach associated with athletes, martial artists, or musicians in their quest to improve performance. Deliberate practice "entails considerable, specific, and sustained effort to do something you can't do well—or even at all."[1] To become an expert, an individual "breaks down the skills that are required to be expert and focuses on improving those skill chunks during practice or day-to-day activities, often paired with immediate coaching feedback."[2] For example, an athlete training for the Olympics may establish strength and weight goals in hopes of winning a medal.

Deliberate practice is differentiated from reinforcement activities designed to enable an individual to maintain their current level of performance.

Often, the focus of deliberate practice is the improvement of individual skills. The pursuit of a perfect product launch requires deliberate practice at the team level.

Characteristics of a Perfect Product Launch from Mark Hart's Experience

To achieve a perfect product launch, all stakeholders should strive for mutually beneficial goals rather than mutually exclusive goals. For example, observing how customers currently solve a particular problem is beneficial to all team members: those evolving the product concept, designers, developers, marketers, and sales representatives. In contrast, adding more and more features to a product presents a mutually exclusive situation because sales representatives may consider this a positive situation but the engineering team considers it a negative situation because it will result in more work for them.

I have been a part of several almost perfect product launches (or commercializations) that have produced outcomes that included:

- Customers that have purchased and used the product are sharing with their friends that the product is great. Most of the reviews are four or five stars. Assessments such as the net promoter score (a customer loyalty metric which is based on the single question "How likely is it that you would recommend our company to a friend or colleague?")[6] are positive.
- The legacy sales and marketing organization has embraced the new product and incorporated it into its existing catalog of products. Most of the learning curve for the new product is complete.

No major obstacles remain to applying existing tactics to sell the new product

- The development team has transitioned to other projects. All the commitments have been fulfilled. There is no more documentation to be written. No significant technical debt exists. The project has met the team's definition of done.
- The careers of people associated with the project have advanced because of the perceived success of the project.
- Members of the development team reminisce that the experience of being a part of the team that produced this product was one of the best experiences of their career. Their contributions were appreciated. They learned new skills and mastered existing ones. They made new, valuable professional connections in a diverse set of disciplines. During development, the daily mood was characterized as synergistic. Everyone associated with the project was respectful of other team members' time. There were minimal distractions because of bureaucracy. Interruptions were minimal. It was a *positive aesthetic* experience that produced a sense of personal integration and self-expansion.
- The product changed the world.

Plan, do, check, act

In lean manufacturing environments, the experimental approach referred to as plan-do-check-act (PDCA) has a significant overlap with a deliberate practice approach. In the book *Toyota Kata: Managing People for Improvement Adaptiveness and Superior Results*, author Mike Rother[3] refers to future performance goals as target conditions.

PDCA may have a more iterative focus than deliberate practice. It includes examining what did not work as intended, investigating why, adjusting accordingly, and trying again. Typically, short PDCA cycles produce more learning than long PDCA cycles. Often PDCA cycles have durations that range from minutes to months. Often, deliberate practice is associated with years of effort.

Explicit coordination

A common mechanism to enforce new practices in a team environment is explicit coordination. It is based on planning and communication and is a relatively static form of coordination used to manage items such as schedules and the exchange of information. Explicit coordination is characterized by repetitive patterns of responses for predefined situations.

Often, organizations that prefer to rely on explicit coordination advocate deliberate practice in areas such as:
- Creating detailed processes
- Investing in tools such as knowledge management systems
- Managing human resources

Attaining the highest performance in dynamic new product development environments requires more than simply improved explicit coordination.

Implicit coordination

For higher performance, teams need to pursue improvements based on implicit coordination patterns. Implicit coordination is a process that takes place when "team members anticipate the actions and needs of their colleagues and task demands and dynamically adjust their own behavior accordingly, without having to communicate directly with each other or plan the activity," according to the thinking of Rico, Sánchez-Manzaranes, Gil, and Gibson in a 2008 article in the Academy of Management Review.[4]

They believe there is a reciprocal relationship between implicit coordination and team situation models (TSM). They further contend that team situation models are "dynamic, context-driven mental models concerning key areas of the team's work, such as the objectives or roles of colleagues." A TSM is an "emergent group property characterizing a team as a whole." "Sharedness and accuracy of TSM jointly facilitate implicit coordination behaviors." "Sharedness of a TSM is the degree to which team members' situation models are consistent with one another." Accuracy of a TSM is the similarity between the team's TSM and the product vision.

The Rico, et al. article states that "effective implicit coordination requires team members to develop situation models providing a shared and accurate understanding of key overlapping aspect of their work." In a cross-functional new product development network, an appropriate TSM should enable each specialist (the engineer, the market specialist, the designer, etc.) to practice the behaviors that contribute to higher performance.

By improving implicit coordination, a new product team can achieve better results with a lower headcount. Individuals are able to do more than just "complete their assignments." The team becomes more agile. Development can be faster because queues are shorter. The ability to absorb variability increases.
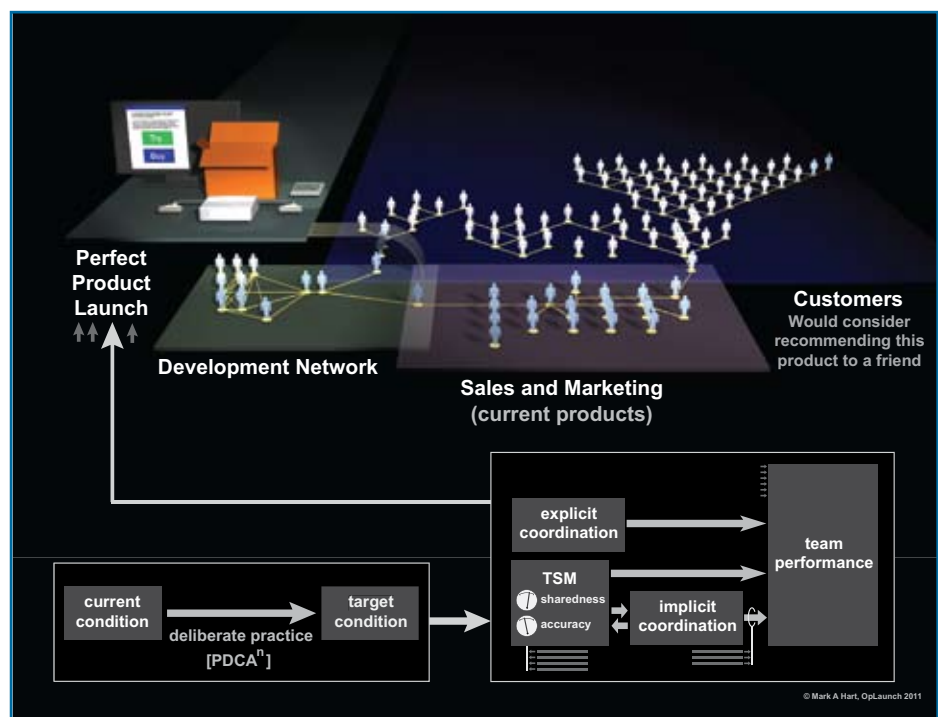
Lessons from an almost perfect product launch

The following information has been extracted from an almost-perfect product launch that I was involved in at Hewlett-Packard for a scientific instrument (a mass spectrometer, an instrument used by scientists to identify chemical compounds). The vision for the launch of this product was consistent with the characteristics of a perfect product launch listed in the box on page 6.

Selecting deliberate practice

In order to select what to practice deliberately, review the vision of the product launch. To formulate better TSMs, consider designating an architect.[5] Assess current conditions. Enlist the appropriate coaches. Self-coaching is an option for some individuals.

Exhibit 1: Mutually Beneficial Goals of Stakeholders in the Pursuit of Perfect Product Launch

Perfect Product Launch

Development Network

Sales and Marketing (current products)

Customers
Would consider recommending this product to a friend

explicit coordination

TSM
sharedness
accuracy

implicit coordination

team performance

current condition

deliberate practice [PDCA^n]

target condition

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Certain reactions from stakeholders may signify a perfect product launch. The reaction from the sales department that leads to a perfect product launch is "I can sell this product". The desired customer reaction is "5-stars", while the developer should report "This team was the best."

SOURCE: The Author

Characteristics of a great coach

Different types of coaches are needed for specific current conditions. The greater the current performance level, the greater the need for a coach who has reached a high level of achievement. Enlist coaches that have expert skills in one particular domain and a great appreciation of contributions from other disciplines. These individuals have depth and breadth and may be referred to as "T-shaped people." They are collaborative. They experiment and verify performance improvements.

Improving implicit coordination performance

To improve performance related to implicit coordination, the team or team leaders should study the framework proposed by Rico. According to this framework, factors that moderate the relationship between implicit coordination and team performance include: task routineness, task interdependence, and virtuality. Factors that are positively related to TSM are longevity, trust, and group efficacy. The factor that is negatively related to TSM is knowledge diversity. Find a coach that can guide your team through deliberate practice to improve an appropriate number of these factors.

Perpetual pursuit

This leads us to the question of how team members in cross-functional, geographically dispersed new product development networks adopt goals that are within their control and improve their performance so that their efforts are consistent with the pursuit of perfect product launch?

Exhibit 1 on page 7 holds part of the answer. It depicts three stakeholder groups of a new product development project. Each group is structured in a unique way. Perfect product launch is at the intersection of the three groups. Some individuals interact with two groups.

The pursuit of perfect product launch is also a quest to replicate these types of outcomes. For passionate new product development professionals, it doesn't end with the current project or the next. Ⅴ

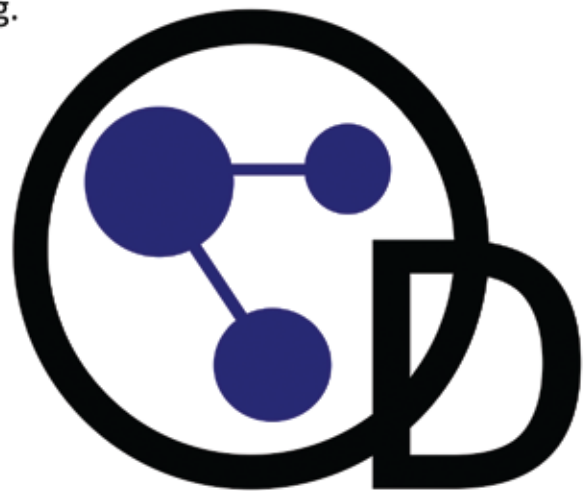### Endnotes

1. K. Anders Ericsson, Michael J. Prietula, and Edward T. Cokely. "The Making of an Expert." *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 85, No. 7/8, pp. 114-121, 2007.
2. Deliberate practice. See: *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Practice_(learning_method)*
3. Mike Rother, *Toyota Kata: Managing People for Improvement, Adaptiveness, and Superior Results*, (McGraw-Hill 2009).
4. Ramón Rico, Miriam Sánchez-Manzanares, Francisco Gil, and Cristina Gibson. "Team implicit coordination processes: A team knowledge-based approach." *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 163-184, 2008.
5. Mark A Hart, "Who will you designate as Launch Architect." PDMA *Visions*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, pp 6-7, 2007.
6. Net Promoter. See *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Net_Promoter*