

Why Doers Do

It was one of those perfect autumn mornings as Luke pulled into the parking lot of the IT headquarters of the Mid-America Insurance company. The coolness of air complemented perfectly the warmth of the sun for that rare balance of comfort that indoor heating and air conditioning systems strive to strike.

Walking into his building, Luke was still enjoying his lingering thoughts of the upcoming holiday season. As he settled into his office, he made a vow to himself to continue this sense of optimism. Just like the weather outside, today he was going to see his work as blue-sky opportunities and marginal problems as simple bumps in the road. He was in the office early to get a jump on things, so he'd start with the positive.

“Where was the glass half full? Ah, the Claims Express system. That, of all the current projects, was running the smoothest. The business hadn't been complaining, the budget was under control, and milestones were being met on time. Let's see what best practices we can learn from Claims Express.”

He picked up the phone and called Elaine, his program manager. He knew her to be an early bird like him and, sure enough, she was in. He asked her into his office. Elaine strode into his doorway, but stopped there leaning against the door jamb. She used her time efficiently and her body language said she would converse, but only briefly and then return to work.

“Gorgeous day, eh, Elaine?”

“You bet. You live for days like this. What's up?”

“Just wanted to talk about Claims Express.”

“It's only Tuesday. Our status meeting isn't until Thursday. If you want, I can give you....”

“No, no,” Luke chuckled. “just wanted to talk. High level. The project is going pretty well, right?”

“Yes.” Elaine didn't sound sure.

“I mean our business partners are happy, right?”

Nothing. Elaine just widened her eyes.

“Well, no one's complained lately,” he asked.

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“Not to you,” she chuckled.

“There are complaints?” Luke’s shoulders sunk.

“Yeah. Nothing major. Or you would be hearing about it. But I spend an hour a day just putting out fires. Yeah, there are complaints.”

“But tell me the budget and the schedule are on track.”

“OK. They’re on track.” Now she was smirking.

“Don’t tell me the reports are lying.”

“No, they’re not. But they don’t show the whole story. There’s a lot of ugliness that those reports sugar-coat. Now, our team isn’t lying to me and I’m not lying to you. It’s just that Claims Express isn’t going as great as a lot of us think.”

Elaine came into the office and sat down.

“Actually, Luke, I’m glad we’re talking about this. Thanks for asking.”

That afternoon, Luke found himself in a conference room with Elaine and two others: Olivia, the project manager for the Claims Express system, and Tim, who managed the team that tested the software releases.

“The reason we’re here,” Luke started, then stopped. He looked at the ceiling for an instant to find his words. “We’re here to... agree on the reason we’re working on the Claims Express system.”

The room was silent. The faces were emotionless. If Luke wasn’t the manager, they would have laughed.

“Well, Luke,” Olivia finally said, “you have the project charter, but I can email you another copy.”

“This isn’t about the charter,” said Luke. “I just want to hear from each of you on what the goal of the project is.”

“But we all know the goals of the project,” Olivia said.

“Tell you what, then. I want each of us, me included, to jot down the goal of the project. If they’re all the same, or even in the same ballpark, the meeting is over.”

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“Fair enough,” Tim chuckled. Tim was always looking at his life as either time doing work or time not doing work. This was the latter, so he was already passing around the paper.

It only took a few seconds for each of them to write on a piece of paper and slide it over to Luke. (Luke noticed with interest that some of them folded the paper over, as if their response was secret.) After reading the notes, Luke grinned.

“I’m guessing,” said Olivia, “a couple of us came up with different answers.”

“No,” said Luke.

“No?”

“No. We *all* came up with different answers.”

“Well I’m sure some of the words are different,” said Olivia.

“You tell me,” said Luke, standing up. He went to the white board and transcribed the sheets of paper:

- SOFTWARE DELIVERED TO SPEC (SCOPE), ON TIME (SCHEDULE), AT LOW COST (BUDGET)
- CLAIMS SYSTEM WITH ZERO DEFECTS IN PRODUCTION / HIGH QUALITY
- BUSINESS USERS WITH HIGH SATISFACTION OF CLAIMS EXPRESS
- S/W DEVELOPERS WHO HAVE IMPROVED THEIR CODING SKILLS / MOTIVATED TO DO BETTER ON THE NEXT PROJECT

Silence again. Tim realized the meeting wasn’t over.

“This is all good,” Luke finally said, recognizing the half full glass. “but certainly not the same. We all have quite explicit, clear goals, but none of them are the same. Look. One is classic project management. Olivia, I’ll guess that’s yours. It’s what I’d expect. The next is quality. Tim, it’s about testing, right? The third one is mine. I’m all about what our users and customers say about our product. So Elaine, that last one is yours? I have to say it’s a bit surprising. I also have to say I’m ashamed I didn’t think of that one. It’s the only one about the people.”

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“So, who’s right?” asked Tim.

“I think we all are. We have the beginning of our new scorecard.”

Luke tore the flipchart sheets from the easel, folded them under his arm, and proceeded to his office with more skip in his step than when he had entered the room.

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Luke’s meeting that afternoon rattled around his head for several days. It came back to him in different shapes and forms. It even recurred to him later in the week during his hockey game. That project meeting was all counterintuitive. Four people all working in the same department all had different goals for their efforts. All valid, but different. No wonder they weren’t successful.

No more successful, in fact, than The Pretenders. Tonight, they weren’t having their butts handed to them, but they were still losing by a good margin. Sad, when a good night is only losing by a little. Luke looked down the bench and saw George and Dale laughing it up.

Something was incongruous here. Why did George and Dale not share Luke’s gloom? Here they were, losing another game, yet to look at those two, you’d think they were winning the Stanley Cup. Look at Andrea at the end of the bench. She had a pretty dour look on her face. Certainly, she was sharing Luke’s sense of frustration and annoyance at not doing better tonight. And who knew what Chris was thinking?

How could the same game elicit such different reactions? It reminded him of his team at work, when they discovered they all had different goals. Different goals? Goals! Damn, the other team scored again. Maybe Luke’s teammates defined success in different ways.

So, just like with his department managers at work, here was Luke sitting there assuming they all had the same purpose for coming out on dark winter nights late every Tuesday. But, thinking more closely about it, that was probably untrue. There was one way to find out and it involved a cold beer. A very cold beer.

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His hair still wet from his shower, Luke was leaning against Chris' truck in the rink parking lot. It was Chris' turn for beer this week. No need for refrigeration; the 25 degree night was better than any ice chest. Most of the team was there; only a few had early mornings the next day.

"Good skate," Dale said.

"Yeah," said Luke. "Short bench. Man, I was sucking wind for the last half hour."

"That was great, eh?" said Chuck. "I hate it when too many players show up. This was perfect tonight. Lots of ice time."

"We had a shot to win tonight," Luke said. "but those three quick goals killed us. Would be nice to win a game every now and then."

"Would be nice," Dale said, "but gimme a break. I didn't see any professional scouts in the stands. It's not like we're going to get drafted. Except for Ryan there."

Ryan was a teenager, a great skater, big and clearly in a different league from the rest.

"Too young for a beer at our club here?" Luke asked.

"No," Ryan said. "I've got practice in the morning." (Ryan was on a local college team and sometimes played Tuesdays to get extra ice time.)

"Holy crap. You're playing tomorrow after a work-out like that tonight?"

Andrea laughed so abruptly, she sprayed some beer foam from her mouth.

"Work out? That was no work-out. For you maybe. But Ryan's no 40-something father of three. He's out here for a tune-up."

"Yeah," said Dale. "You know how he rarely shoots. He always passes if off, even when he has a good shot. He could score every time, if he wanted to. Glad he's on our team."

Dale was their goalie, good but not great. He showed up every week like clockwork, which was a plus in a pick-up league like this one. No goalie meant a forfeit.

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“All right, guys, it’s been real,” said Dale. “but I’ve got to get home. Good game, guys.”

“Yeah. We survived another,” said Chris.

Luke never paid too much attention to his teammates’ words before, but Chris’ comment was thematic, not that Luke thought about it. His signature line was, “Gotta play hard but, hey, we all still need to work in the morning.” Translated: it would be stupid to get injured playing in a pick-up league; winning’s not worth that much. It never occurred to Luke before.

“Yes, gents,” said Luke over his shoulder, walking to his truck, “See you next week.”

“How interesting,” thought Luke, driving home. “We really do have different goals for playing on this hockey team. I just always assumed they shared my goals. The goals are not necessarily conflicting; most of us probably agree with each other, but our priorities sure are different. Just like my department at work.”

He chuckled, imaging pulling a flip chart out of his truck and setting it up in the parking lot, then asking each team member to write down their goals for being on the team. He’d be laughed off of the parking lot along with a flip chart. Even a discussion of what everyone’s individual goals are for playing hockey would result in mockery, probably even a few empty beer cans chucked his way.

But Luke got the information he wanted from that sporadic parking lot chat and driving home he listed the performance goals of his hockey team:

1. Win. (Individual games and the play-offs – related but discrete. This was Luke’s.)
2. Get a good work-out. (Bob.)
3. Not get injured. (Dale.)
4. Be out of the house. (Stan.)

Interesting. Just like with his employees, some teammates simply assumed they all shared the same goals. But in reality, the performance goals were quite different.

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The next morning, Luke knocked on his eldest son's bedroom door. As usual, the alarm had gone off, but Cyrus hit the snooze button several times.

"Time to get up."

The reply was some prehistoric monosyllable from underneath a pile of covers.

Later, in the kitchen, Luke was already ramping up his brain for another day at the office. He was going over that conversation with Elaine and Olivia on the outputs of their department. Just as with his hockey teammates, everyone assumed they agreed on a standard output, but after discussion, they are really quite different. All valid, granted, but different.

"That came as a surprise," he thought, as Cyrus shuffled into the kitchen. "At least, there would be no surprise whatsoever that my kids and I are not on the same page when it comes to desired performance. Yeah, right."

Even the shower hadn't fully awoken Cyrus. He wouldn't be fully awake until a little before lunchtime.

"What's on tap for you today, pal?"

"Nothing."

"What's the latest on your SAT test?"

Despite Luke's attempt not to sound adversarial or judgmental, Cyrus still rolled his eyes and turned his head away.

"No," Luke said. "I just want to know the status. When is the test? Where? Are you prepping? Do you feel ready?"

To get Cyrus' attention, he communicated the best way fathers and sons communicate: a firm punch on the shoulder. Cyrus flinched with a grin and shadowed a weak attempt at a counterpunch.

"Things are fine. Under control."

"I need a little more detail."

More rolling of eyes. Head turned completely away. Luke brandished a fist over Cyrus. The son smiled and threw his arms up in protection.

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“You realize the importance of this, right? I don’t really care what college you go to. I just want you to be somewhere *you* want to be. And getting the SATs done well gives you more options.”

“I know. I’ve got a lot going on. There’s regular school work.”

Maybe Luke was still flush from new thinking about his team’s output at work, or humbled by learning that he really didn’t know what made his teammates at the rink tick, but for the first time in a while, he didn’t launch into another debate with his son. Instead, he measured Cyrus’ question in a literal sense.

“So, you’re asking, ‘what’s the ultimate performance I’m looking for?’”

“What? Dad, I’m not one of your corporate flunkies.”

“No, hear me out. Studying for SAT tests. Doing homework. That’s all behavior. You’re asking me, ‘Stop the babble, Dad. Cut to the chase. What’s the endgame I want?’”

“Yeah...” Cyrus replied cautiously.

“OK. When you were a kid, it was enough that you went to school each day, listened, took tests and that was about it. But you’re too old for that now. More is expected.”

“Exactly.”

“So, what do I want? What’s the performance? The output? I guess it would be that you are a good student.”

“But that’s up to me. You said it just now. I’m too old for that.”

“Yes, but Mom and I pay for college, so it isn’t just up to you. You are now responsible for more than showing up. It isn’t your teachers’ jobs to remember SATs and college essays; it’s yours. That’s part of how I define being a good student. Does that make sense?”

“It’s lame,” Cyrus groaned.

“I’m not asking you to like it. Does it make sense? It will cost Mom and I money, so I have a right to demand that performance.”

“Yes, but ‘demand?’ That seems harsh.”

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“Agreed. But since I have a stake in this, I have a right expect a certain performance from you and from your brother and sister too. Hey. Aren’t you late for school?”

Cyrus jumped off the stool and started out.

“Oh, Dad. One thing.”

“What?”

“This.”

Cyrus punched his father hard on the shoulder, before bounding out of the kitchen.

Later that day, in between meetings, Luke reflected on his morning conversation with Cyrus. In the context of his efforts to realign and re-energize his department and his late-night hockey conversation in the parking lot, it seemed his talk with his son was no different: after identifying who needs to “do the doing,” he next had to identify what needs to be done, the desired performance. Even though it was Cyrus he was speaking with that morning, Cyrus was representative of all his kids.

So, the performers, or the doers, were:

- Luke’s three children: Cyrus, Lily and Vince

And during the morning, Luke refined the desired performance to be stated as:

Be good students, including:

- Get A’s and B’s as grades, maybe with one C allowed.
- Don’t miss deadlines for assignments, papers, etc.
- Have a plan for after high school, one that prepares them for the future. That could be college or something else, but have a plan.
- Follow-through on that plan, again hitting all key milestones, like SAT tests, essays, applications, etc.