



# The Effective Organization

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## Cut Loose the Anchors

*“We need to take our time and carefully evaluate the situation.”*

*“We don’t have a lot of time and we need to move forward.”*

Both of these statements were made about the same project by different sets of people. The first was made by a representative of a large company, the second by a representative of a much smaller company with which the larger company was working. The folks from the large company wanted to plan everything out to the last detail, avoid any possible errors, guarantee a perfect product, and not move forward until success was assured. The members of the smaller company, not having the financial resources of the larger company and being more personally invested, wanted to get the project started.

In any project, it’s important to evaluate the situation and determine the best way to move forward. However, in any non-trivial project, it’s impossible at the beginning to foresee every eventuality. When leaving on a trip, one attempts to plan for various contingencies such as traffic, weather, flight delays, and so forth; however, some things cannot be predicted either because they are too far off to see clearly or because changing conditions make long-term prediction unreliable. On the

other hand, it’s foolish to set forth on a journey without making some effort to predict the possible pitfalls and plan for how to deal with them.

There’s an old saying that “no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.” While true, how, and when, the battle plan fails can provide valuable information about what is going wrong and how to fix it. That’s assuming, of course, that the plan is designed correctly in the first place.

When planning a project, be it a battle, software development, a sales campaign, or just about anything else, the first step is always to understand how you’ll know when you’re at your destination. If you don’t know what success looks like in terms of the results you expect to achieve, it’s all too easy to take the wrong turn. Once you know what success is, only then can you identify what failure looks like.

Of course, success or failure is still a long way off. That means that your descriptions will, of necessity, be more or less vague. In order to sharpen your focus, you need to identify several stopping points between where you are now and where you want to end up. When doing this exercise, it often helps to work backward from the end point.

## Publications

*Learning Through Entertainment: Skills Training with Serious Games* presented at the Association for Experiential Education 37th annual conference.

*Take off your hat: You're in the presence of culture* was published in the January 2010 issue of Analog Science Fiction/Fact.

[\*Stalking the Elusive Leader\*](#) was published in the Journal of Corporate Recruiting Leadership.

[\*Light's better here\*](#) was published in the Messenger.

[\*Boiling the Frog\*](#) was published in the CEO Refresher.

[\*Building confidence by focusing on success on Youth Sport Radio\*](#)

[\*How to Foster an Innovative Workforce\*](#) live interview

[\*Leadership and Team Formation\*](#) live interview



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Those stopping points become your initial milestones and should be sharper the closer they are to your starting point. A secondary goal of your milestones is to identify resources and

dependencies and make sure they will be available or met at appropriate times.

For each milestone you must once again repeat the process of understanding where you are and how you'll know if you didn't get there. Your goal is not to avoid all possible errors, but to make sure you can identify errors as quickly as possible and be willing to cut your losses before you've invested too many resources down a non-functional path. When you're uncertain which way to go, it often helps to explore several possibilities simultaneously. Some will be wrong, but if you cut your losses well, then you can save a great deal of time and may develop some novel or unexpected solutions. Walt Disney liked to have a dozen movies in production at once: he knew that half of them would flop, just not which half.

Once you have your milestones, you can get started. At each milestone, you need to evaluate your progress and adjust as necessary. What worked and what did not? Have unexpected problems cropped up? Are their external dependencies that may become a problem? It's not about

fixing blame but about understanding how to best allocate your resources and move forward. Mistakes are part of the game and initial guesses about how difficult tasks are or how long they might take are often wrong.

Once you've done all that, you're still not ready to move forward to the next milestone. It's important to take a little time and see what you've learned about your upcoming milestones. Have they come into sharper focus? Do they need to change? Have you discovered new dependencies that need to be taken into account or are there old dependencies that are no longer relevant?

While this may seem like a lot of work, with a little practice it becomes surprisingly easy. Once you understand your route and know how you'll adjust it as necessary, cutting loose the anchors and moving forward is remarkably simple and even relaxing. You'll reach your destination faster than if you rush forward without considering or planning for potential obstacles and much faster than if you never start.

## *About 7 Steps Ahead*



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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