Six Principles for Self-Mastery: The Napoleon Way

By Jerry Manas, PMP

Organizations everywhere tout project management as a key driver for success. But good project management principles are beneficial to *each and every one of us* in everything we do.

The premise is simple. Whether we're writing a book, producing a film, or planning a vacation, we are trying to achieve at least one objective, usually more. And, at its core, project management is the art of leading others to successfully achieve objectives. Bet before we lead others, we must lead ourselves. Luckily, the same principles apply.

I am, of course, in the project management field. But it wasn't until I began writing a book on project management that I realized that, in the process of developing and writing the book, I was personally using the same project management principles I was writing about. It was truly life imitating art. It also dawned on me that the same principles apply to the achievement of any endeavor in life.

The Importance of Principles

During the research I had done for my book, *Napoleon on Project Management*, I discovered that Napoleon Bonaparte's considerable accomplishments were due to what I call "Napoleon's Six Winning Principles." These principles are:

- Exactitude
- Speed
- Flexibility
- Simplicity
- Character
- Moral Force

Let's take a look at each and see how they can apply to almost any venture we undertake in life.

First, let's consider *exactitude.* Exactitude refers to pinpoint precision, which we can achieve by conducting enough research to understand the subject matter of whatever endeavor we're about to undertake—and by planning continuously throughout our endeavor, not just once at the beginning. For instance, when writing my first book, not only did I conduct extensive research on the book's subject matter, but I read numerous books on the query and proposal process, and researched the potential market for the book. And once I had a publisher, I read books on how to best work with publishers. The same principles apply in nearly any field. And, just like cooking, you don't need to

follow a recipe verbatim, but it's good to understand the basics so you're not just "winging it."

Speed is the next principle on the list. This requires that we maintain a sense of urgency and focus our energy on the most critical things to be done. Otherwise, our efforts get diluted among the many distractions we'll no doubt face. We can increase urgency by setting incremental milestones (provided they are realistic), and, for each iteration, calculating what's left to do versus how much time we have left to do it. And we can improve our focus by minimizing extraneous activities (i.e. not trying to do too much with each iteration) and by removing barriers as they appear, which in essence is like removing "air resistance" in aerodynamics.

With exactitude and speed under our belt (i.e. we have our research done, our roadmap outlined, and have insured that our energy is focused), we are off to a good start. But since, as the saying goes, "the map is not the territory," we also need to insure *flexibility* by readying ourselves to adapt to a variety of possible outcomes as we approach "the territory." This requires that we go through some mental "scenario walkthroughs," so we think about the risks and how to deal with them in advance. Even with all of that, if circumstances change for whatever reason, we should be ready and willing to change our plans accordingly. As John Lennon said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

Our fourth principle is *simplicity*. Great leaders and marketing experts have long touted simplicity as a key principle of success. Simplicity can mean straightforward objectives (as opposed to trying to get overly complicated) or it can mean concise, clear, and focused messages when we're communicating with others. As Harry Beckwith said in his landmark book on service marketing, *Selling the Invisible*, "Saying many things usually communicates nothing." If our endeavor requires that we communicate with people (and most endeavors do), this one simple rule can help us.

Simplicity can also mean simple processes for managing and executing our plans. For example, it's better (and quicker) to ask directions than to fumble our way through trial and error. Likewise, with projects, we need to engage the subject matter experts and let the people closest to the details drive the actions, allowing us to focus on the outcomes. In all of its forms—whether in our objectives, messages, or processes—simplicity is a way to reduce confusion.

Our fifth principle is *character*, which includes traits such as integrity, calmness, and responsibility, all of which have been associated with the greatest leaders throughout history. Integrity says that our words and actions are integrated, and that they are ethically bound. We cannot say one thing and do another. And if things don't go our way, we must remain calm and think through the plusses and minuses. Finally, we must be accountable, and that means 360° accountability—to others and to ourselves.

Character is what allows us to remain steadfast in our venture, despite obstacles, political battles, and naysayers. But, since it implies 360° accountability, we cannot be

pigheaded either. We must take in advice (even seeking out opposing opinion, as Napoleon was said to do), judiciously scrutinize our principles, and ultimately make the right decision while considering the impact on all parties.

The sixth and final principle is *moral force*, perhaps the most important of the six principles. It is what allows us to surpass expectations and overcome the inevitable obstacles. And it's what gets us on board with the mission and excited by the potential outcome. This applies not only to building the morale of a team, but to building and maintaining our own morale as individuals.

Moral force consists of providing order, purpose, recognition, and rewards. First, by being organized and disciplined—thus establishing a sense of order—we gain the self-confidence that we can achieve our goals. And self-confidence is one of the surest paths to success. But to keep us on the straight and narrow path, we need to feel a sense of purpose—the knowledge that what we are doing is worthwhile and important. Without that, it's too easy to give up at the first sign of resistance.

Recognition is critical as well, and this applies to acknowledging our own achievements, not just those of others (which we should of course do). We should take inventory of our successes to date, so we never forget just what it is we've accomplished. And, where appropriate, we should advertise our achievements to others (which, if we have a team, is best done by touting the team's accomplishments). If recognition gives much-needed visible acknowledgement of a job well done, rewards are a way to give gratitude. It feels good to reward ourselves, as well as others, after the accomplishment of a major milestone or goal. It gives us something to look forward to, and inspires us to do more. It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive, but any kind of tangible reward goes a long way.

As the above examples illustrate, these six principles—exactitude, speed, flexibility, simplicity, character, and moral force—are essential for leading others, and equally appropriate for leading ourselves. Indeed, they are the essence of both project management and self-mastery.