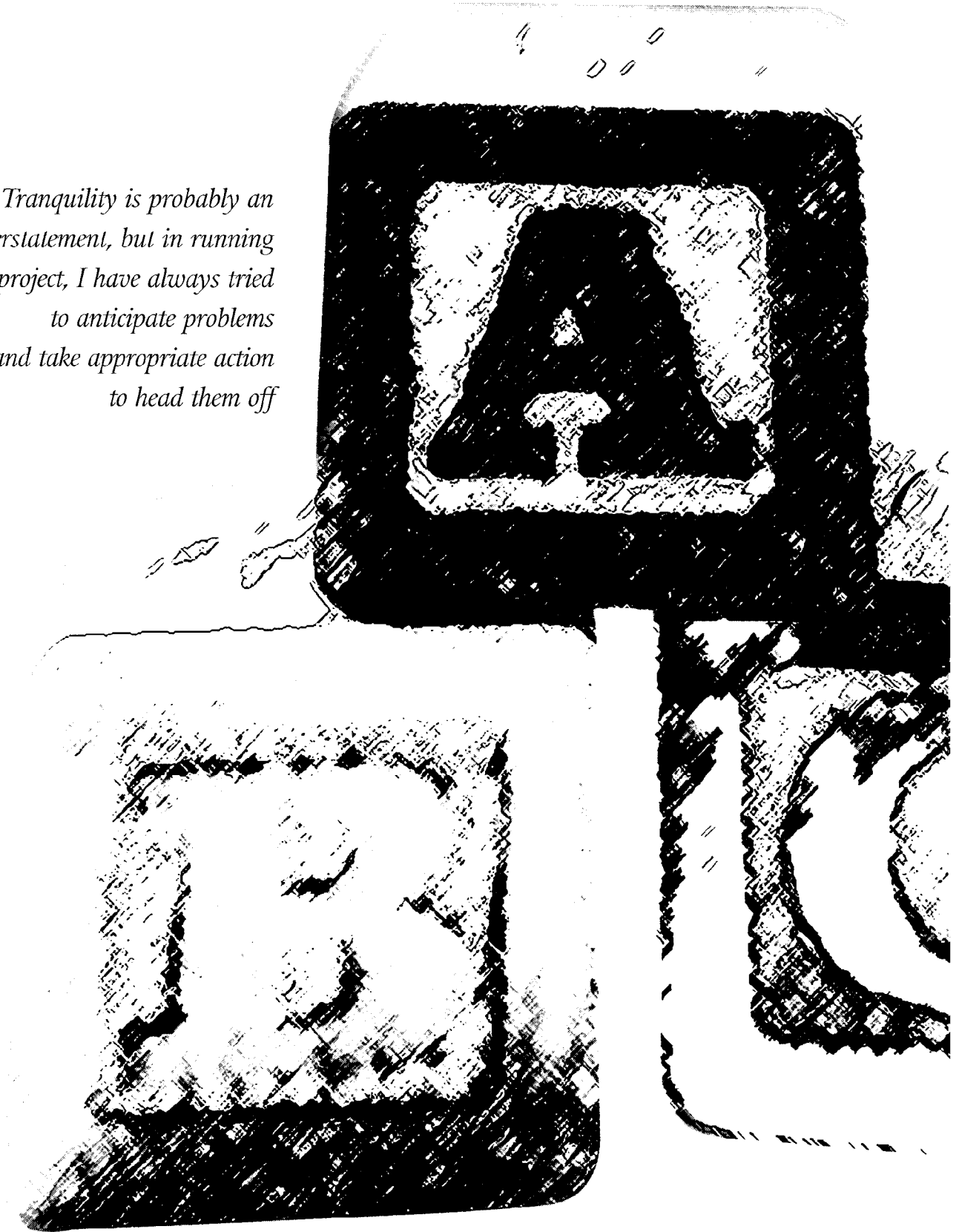


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Learning the ABCs (of Project Management)

BY ALLAN FRANDBEN

TO LEAD A PROJECT EFFECTIVELY, ONE HAS TO ESTABLISH AND maintain the flexibility to take appropriate actions when needed. Overconstrained situations should be avoided. To get on top of matters and stay there, a manager needs to anticipate what it will take to successfully complete the job. Physical and financial resources, personnel, and management structure are all important considerations. Carving out the necessary turf up front can make a world of difference to the project's outcome. After the "what," "where," and "when" of a project are nailed down, the next question is "how" to do the job.

When I first interviewed for the job of Science Payload Manager on the Advanced Composition (ACE) Explorer mission, Dr. Edward Stone (ACE Principal Investigator) asked, "Al, give me an idea of your management style."

It was a question I had not considered before. I thought about it for a few seconds and then answered, "Well, the first descriptive term that comes to mind is the word 'tranquility'."



That seemed to startle him. So I added, "I guess what I mean is, that if the situation is tranquil and the project is running smoothly, then I've anticipated all the problems and taken necessary actions to head them off."

He then asked: "Have you ever reached this state?"

"No," I admitted, "but I strive for it." That seemed to satisfy him because I got the job.

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I once told Dr. Stone that if I had to write down the ABCs of project management, "A" would signify Anticipation. But it is not just a planning activity that needs to take place at the beginning. It is an ongoing thought process that reviews plans over various time intervals. A manager needs to work all the time to avoid losing control of events and operating only in the reactive mode. Putting out forest fires, being under the gun or behind the 8-ball—these are expressions we are all familiar with. To avoid being in one of these situations, there needs to be a frequent assessment of the current status, and reflective thinking about what could happen next. Of course a good project manager already knows, at least in general terms, what is supposed to happen next. But all too often it doesn't happen that way. So what are the alternatives? Are there sensible work-arounds? What can I do now to lay the groundwork or facilitate matters should something go wrong? These and other questions make up the ongoing process of anticipation. And because it is an ongoing process, the "A" in the ABCs of project management could just as well stand for Anticipate, Anticipate, Anticipate, . . .

One of the important activities at the start of any project is identifying and recruiting the staff necessary to do the job. One should always try to sign up the best, mutually compatible talent available. In this process, and until charisma transplants become available, it helps if the manager is inherently excited about the project. Exuding enthusiasm can become contagious, and it goes a long way toward recruiting the best people. With the right team in place, the manager's job is likely to have fewer day-to-day problems, as well as being less stressful

than it otherwise would have been. Hence, it is well worth the effort up front to carve out the time, and generate the enthusiasm, to Build a Good Team, the "B" in the ABCs of project management.

Once a project is up and running, a manager needs to establish and monitor channels of information flow. The manager needs to foster communications between and among participants. You certainly don't want to hear of a problem being excused by such statements as "I didn't know I was supposed to . . .," or "I didn't know that what he was doing was incompatible with . . .," etc. And of course there are always peers as well as upper management who need to be apprised of what is

going on. In the absence of sufficient information, they could well form a wrong opinion of the current state of affairs. Or worse yet, undertake counter-productive actions based on invalid conclusions. A busy manager doesn't need any counter-productive "help" by well-intended colleagues. So the best defense is a good offense. Take the time to communicate upwards, downwards, and sideways. Communicating is the "C" in the ABCs of project management.

Now there is also an "s" at the end of the ABCs of project management. Does that have any significance? Well I would say that despite your best laid plans and ongoing attention to the job, the situation can turn to manure in a hurry if a personnel matter arises. So Sustaining this prized team you have recruited has to be an important part of a manager's job as well. Sustaining the team includes recognizing their accomplishments, and arranging the job so they find it satisfying. Conversely, a heavy handed management style can be the death knell to a team member's feeling of personal responsibility for success. On projects requiring that people exhibit resourcefulness and innovation, they need to be given not only the responsibility but also authority to spread their wings. Constructive criticism may be called for at times. But that is different from punishment. For research & development in particular, ongoing attention needs to be paid to supporting the team. Sustain the Team concludes the ABCs of project management. •

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