PROLEGO

Prolego's Principles

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About

Every day presents an opportunity to get better at what we do. Every mistake, every challenge, every bad outcome, and every success is an opportunity for us to become better at our mission of making AI the default operating system of business.

Prolego's principles are an efficient way to share these lessons with each other and with new team members. They form the foundation of our culture.

Prolego's approach to principles:

We can take inspiration from others, but our principles are unique to us.

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Everyone owns our principles. We critically evaluate and challenge them when necessary.

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Principles are living and constantly updated.

- -

We share our principles publicly.

HOW TO USE THESE PRINCIPLES

In a famously hilarious scene in The Office, Michael Scott (Steve Carell) blindly follows his car's navigator into a lake. Although Prolego's principles are like a navigator, don't blindly follow them. Be smarter than Michael Scott!

Use our principles to help organize your thinking, keep everyone accountable, and communicate our culture and values. But recognize that they won't lead you to useful insights in every context.

Thinking principles

Prolego's "thinking principles" remind us to be patient with humble beginnings, conscious of psychological barriers to progress, and wary of egotism.

Think big but start small

There's only one proven approach to building great solutions. It applies to startups, enterprise projects, and even biological evolution. That approach is to start with a small solution that delivers value and then iterate to improve it.

This approach is almost guaranteed to garner some resistance. Everyone who works in technology has experienced the pain of trying to scale a solution that was built on an insufficient infrastructure. Our instinct is to avoid past mistakes by building in "the right way" from the outset—that is, to start big.

Unseasoned tech entrepreneurs who worry about scaling problems almost always overbuild their solution before they get user feedback. Similarly, enterprise AI project leaders are prone to over-investing as they try to solve scaling problems related to uptime or computing power.

Starting big is almost always a path to failure because it doesn't address the biggest risks, both known and unknown. Experienced entrepreneurs embrace methodologies like lean startup. They identify and mitigate their biggest risks as fast as possible, usually by getting the product in the hands of users to validate the needs.

Our clients will often be tempted to address problems of scale before they confront the bigger risks. These risks are the biggest threats to an enterprise AI project:

- Data shortcomings
- An inexperienced engineering team
- End-user resistance to adopting the solution
- Absence of a methodology that can solve the business problem

Most of these risks can be mitigated by developing a methodology and deploying the solution as fast as possible. We help our clients avoid the inclination to start big by pushing them to start small. Because all of our clients want a quick win, this approach also generates momentum and enthusiasm for the initiative.

Of course starting small doesn't mean blindly taking on technical debt. Where possible, we should think big by establishing a foundation that can scale through the predictable constraints.

Beware the tragedy of the commons

Tragedy of the commons is a phrase that describes a situation in which everyone can use a resource, but no one is responsible to take care of it. In effect, a group of people ruins a publicly shared resource because everyone acts on that resource based on their own self-interest. Everybody loses because the group failed to plan or enforce protections. A historical example is public pasture land that's ruined when no rules are in place to manage how humans and their animals use the land.

We keep this phenomenon in mind as we help our clients transition into AI-driven organizations. For example, everyone wants access to data, but nobody wants to invest in the infrastructure to make it widely available.

We must remain vigilant of situations where clients are increasingly dependent on a resource for which the company provides no dedicated support and requires no accountability.

Hold your strong opinions weakly

Lean-startup advisor Ash Maurya has offered this wisdom:

> The worst possible answer you can get to a question is: "It depends." . . . "It depends" is often a cop out for fear of being proven wrong. It is better to be prescriptive and wrong, than vague and right. Getting a prescriptive answer leads to action which leads to learning.

"It depends" doesn't help anyone. Of course it depends. It always depends. Few absolutes can be found in AI, business, or anything else.

We and our clients value holding strong opinions about our objectives and the best way to solve problems. Of course we hold onto these strong opinions weakly. That is, in the presence of better data or a better argument, we change our minds.

For example, suppose a client wants the data scientists to build every model on their laptops. Is it possible? Of course. But we have a strong opinion that a scalable, centralized infrastructure is the best foundation for an AI program. However, we change our minds if a client explains that they're developing locally as a temporary step designed to demonstrate the potential value of AI.

Organizational principles

Our organizational principles help
you orient yourself and our partners
in relation to our company.

Be yourself and help others do the same

Our statement of inclusiveness is best summed up by the book title of our friend, DDS Dobson-Smith: You Can Be Yourself Here. Be yourself here at Prolego, and help everyone else be themselves too. That's it!

Being yourself means being okay with how you look, where you come from, and what you can do. Helping everyone else be themselves means celebrating their differences as new perspectives that will make all of us better at our jobs.

As you strive to be true to yourself, we require only that you live up to Prolego's principles. Or if you feel that your true self is incompatible with some of our principles, help us improve.

Hold partners to our standards

In the course of our work, we sometimes need to rely on partners for additional help or expertise. Trying to do everything ourselves is a terrible idea. We value our partners' perspectives and contributions.

We want partners who share our principles and our commitment to excellence. Concept Bureau is a great example of a valued partner. Prolego wouldn't be what it is today without their help.

Unfortunately not every relationship works out. Some partners don't meet our delivery standards. Here are some warning signs that we might need to part ways:

- Missing a self-imposed deadline
- Delivering work products that contain obvious errors
- Blaming us or others for failures

When you see one of these warning signs, address it immediately. Ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand the situation and the partner's perspective. If you suspect the partner's standards are lower than ours, unemotionally confront them and explain our expectations. Don't delay, don't fix the problem for them, and don't hold out hope that this is just a one-time situation.

If the partner isn't receptive or you don't see immediate improvement, begin to terminate the relationship. Waiting will only make the situation worse.

Don't be the lone wolf

> **When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.**
>
> Ned Stark, Game of Thrones

The work we do is incredibly hard, and nobody can do it alone. Our projects involve too many variables and complexities for anyone to handle without help. When you're stuck, confused, or uncertain, call on the pack for assistance. That's why we're here.

Don't try to do it all yourself. Don't be the lone wolf.

Delivery principles

Our delivery principles make us the kind of organization people want to work with again and again. They're the reason clients recommend us to friends and colleagues.
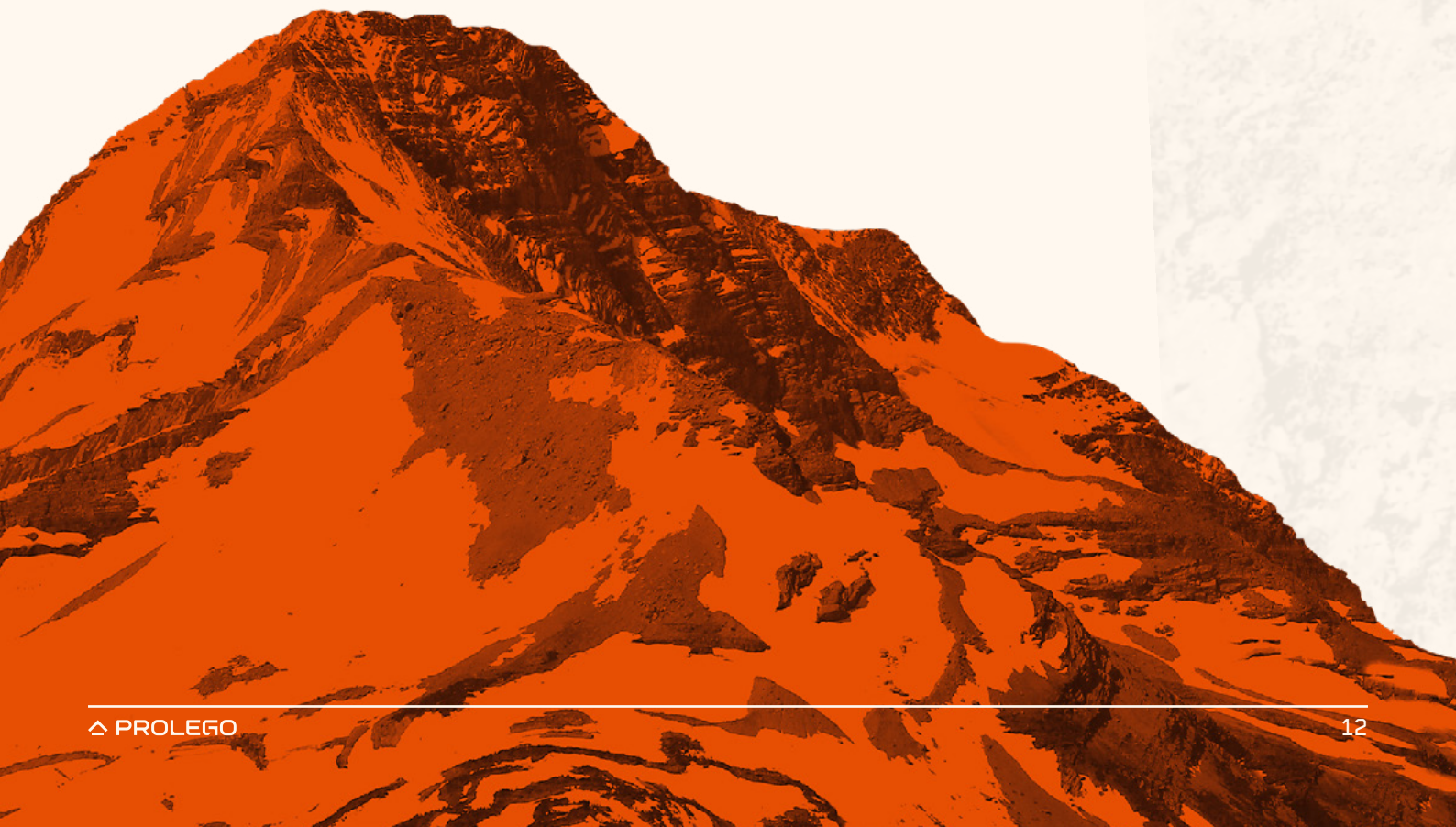
Be the trusted advisor

Being a trusted advisor means putting our client's interest ahead of Prolego's economic interest. Of course we care about ourselves. But we won't advise our clients to take an action that puts our interests ahead of theirs.

For example, we don't recommend a complex solution when a simple solution will work better. The latter might result in less paid work for us, but this level of integrity will serve us in the long run.

Stay ahead of the client and warn them about upcoming challenges, even if they're unrelated to our work.

Own the client's success

What's your job? Is it to build the best model? Configure the servers? Update the roadmap? Nope!

Your job is to help the client succeed. This objective is much bigger than any tasks you have been assigned. Of course you must execute tactically, but you are here because you are elite.

Think strategically and keep the mandate in mind. Think of yourself as our clients' CEO, and look for opportunities to transform their organization and culture for the better. Own the entire result of our engagements. Look for opportunities to make everyone and the whole project succeed. Just own it all.

Shovel coal

Consider this thought experiment:

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Imagine you're an officer aboard a coal-powered cruise ship in 1913. Suddenly you see the captain with a terrified look in his eyes. The captain screams toward you, "My God, we're approaching an iceberg! Unless we pick up speed we can't turn fast enough, and we will suffer the fate of the Titanic! Do something!"

The boilers need more coal or the ship is doomed. You're standing next to the boilers. Nobody else is around, but a shovel is leaning against the door. What should you do?

- Find a seaman to shovel the coal. After all, shoveling coal is a dirty, awful job that's not suitable work for an officer. Shoveling coal is beneath you!

OR

- Grab the shovel and try to save everyone.

- -

Let's face it, AI work isn't always exciting. Sometimes we need to do grunt work to help the project succeed. Sometimes we've got to shovel coal.

Sell your value every day

Our clients are investing a lot in us in terms of both finances and reputation–every day!

Crush the easy stuff

> Just showing up is half the battle.
>
> Woody Allen

It's easy to lose sight of the "easy stuff" when you're focused on solving very hard problems. But failing to do the easy stuff affects our credibility. It can convey to clients that we don't respect them. So crush the easy stuff:

- Be the first to arrive at client meetings and never be late. Ever.

- In status updates, show momentum, confidence, details, and progress:

  NO: "Yesterday I worked on X."

  YES: "Yesterday I finished Y% of X, and I overcame Z. You can look at my progress here . . ."

- Be available. Especially because we're remote, we must be reachable.

  NO: Turn off all notifications because you're heads-down.

  YES: "Hey guys, I'm going to be heads-down all day. Contact Kevin if you need me."

- Prepare for every client conversation. The client notices when you're not prepared.

- Always do what you say you will do.

- Never miss deadlines. Of course our work is often impossible to predict, so alert everyone when deadlines are at risk.

Run through walls

Every project at Prolego—and actually everything in life—has unanticipated, frustrating challenges that will impede your progress. You can think of these obstacles as walls between where our clients are today and where they want to be.

In every project, we see obstacles like these:

- A good percentage of our clients' employees won't want to change. Their leadership will advocate for AI and hire us to drive change, but many people will resist.

- You won't have the tools you need to do your best work. Or you won't have the data you need. Or you won't have the end-user feedback you need.

- A project starts with a strong executive innovation mandate. But as the project progresses, the engineering team will want to revert to existing technologies and habits.

Most people desperately avoid walls. They pick another direction. They stare at the wall in frustration. They call meetings to talk about the wall. They look for easier paths around the wall. Some give up, accept the wall, and then begin making the slow, ambling journey around it.

Be different. Look at the wall as your biggest challenge.
And then run through it.

Build the bridge

Our mission is to help the world's biggest companies become AI-driven organizations. We have many ways to succeed, but they all start with a first step. The first step is often the riskiest and most contentious part of the project. Why? Because infrastructure already exists!

The company already has servers, governance practices, data scientists, DevOps, tools, models, teams, applications, processes, and methodologies. This infrastructure is a source of potential conflict because it's usually optimized for the pre-AI era.

Because we know what AI can do, we're inclined to throw all preexisting infrastructure out and build the future on a newer, better foundation. It seems so obvious to us that we cannot imagine why anyone would start differently.

But our clients might look at this infrastructure as a source of pride and comfort. It's what they've built and what they understand. The infrastructure might be tied to their livelihood and feeling of value. From their perspective, "throw out the old stuff" sounds like a horrible first step! Their default position will be to start building the future as an iteration of what already exists.

In reality, the extreme positions of "throw it all out" and "start with what we already have" are almost always the worst choices. Someone needs to find the optimal path forward by building a bridge between what exists and what's needed.

And that someone is... YOU! So build the bridge.

Align to a mandate

During our first five years, many of Proleto's projects were driven by an earlyvangelist AI leader in our client organizations. In any new industry's early stages, companies that have an earlyvangelist are the only customers available.

But now the AI industry is maturing, and our projects need to be aligned to a mandate. For example, our client must have an executive sponsor who has a vision and long-term budget authority. Projects that start without a mandate don't end well for us or our clients.

After we have a mandate, we need to make sure we align our actions with it. When our actions don't align, we escalate our concerns.

For example, suppose one of our data scientists is developing a methodology for automating a business process. If the client's engineering team wants to redirect us to make only incremental improvements to their existing processes, our data scientist should escalate the misalignment to our Operations & Strategy team (currently Megan, with support from Kevin and others).

Clarify

> Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.
>
> Albert Einstein

Even as technophiles, we're all drowning in information and technobabble. None of us can keep up with the pace of change, and we all look for shortcuts to help us understand AI. Given this environment of change, imagine how our clients feel. Many are already overwhelmed with work.

They spend most of their day going from meeting to meeting. Now imagine their state of mind when you show up to give a presentation or demo on a complex topic. What do they want from you? They want you to simplify everything for them and bring clarity to what's most important.

Simplifying complex topics is very hard. Of course it's easier to unload a lot of details than to synthesize them into a few salient points. But don't take the easy route. Instead, invest the time to make important points relevant for our audience.