



Project Failure

By Patrick Malone, CSE

Recently I read some disturbing information regarding major corporate initiatives. According to a survey by the Utah-based VitalSmarts:

- 82% of employees within companies with significant organization-wide initiatives underway believe those project will fail.
- 78% are currently working on a “doomed” project.
- 90% knew early on the project would likely fall short of the objectives
- 77% describe these projects as “slow motion train wrecks”
- 81% believe it is impossible to approach the failing project’s key decision-maker

The recommended solution with these troubled projects was nothing short of a complete culture change within those organizations. Somehow that solution seems akin to quintuple bypass heart surgery when a less radical angioplasty might be more appropriate.

Given that this survey was statistically well balanced across a full spectrum of companies, I believe it is safe to assume that these negative responses came from companies that could be considered very successful, reasonably successful, fairly successful, occasionally successful and unsuccessful. So if 80% of the responding companies are experiencing some degree of success, is a complete culture change required? It quite probably is the appropriate solution for the 20% that are failing but let’s not throw out the baby with the bath water.

The problem as I see has less to do with corporate culture and more to do with poor communication skills.

Could the project’s key decision-maker do a better job of listening – probably? Unfortunately it’s always been fashionable to lay the blame on the project leader, supervisor, manager, director or executive. Certainly there is always room for improvement on the receiving end but I think we can make greater improvements by working on the sending side of the communication equation.

Every project team has its share of cynics and they seem to have a laundry list of reasons why a project will not achieve the desired outcomes. However these nay-sayers and the deficient listening skills of the decision-maker are only a small part of the problem.

The bigger issue is the inability of the bulk of the project team, who are well-intended and committed employees, to communicate their concerns up, down and across the project team. They want to do a good job but often their attempts at raising the important questions sound like self-serving, purely emotional or infuriating logical rants that do not resonate with the intended receiver.

So if you are a project team member frustrated by the inability to effectively raise your concerns, here are some tips that may relieve some of that stress.

CREATE A COMMON GOAL

First impressions are important and the way you begin your interaction dramatically impacts the outcome. Most people listen with a bias and it sounds like “*What’s in it for me?*” or “*Why should I care?*” So I recommend you begin by confidently stating the benefits of your idea to the other person. Consider these two different openings:

“Boss, we’ve got a major problem with XYZ project” or “Boss, I’ve got some ideas on how we can make XYZ project more successful.”

In the first there is no benefit for the project leader – just another headache. So confidently stating a benefit up front gets the ball rolling in a positive direction.

Secondly, while we have spent some time thinking about the potential problem and developing our solutions, we expect the other person to listen, digest, accept and implement our recommendation in a matter of seconds – too much, too quick. So after confidently stating the benefit, you should simply invite the other person to hear you out or be open to options. That sounds like ... *“So let me explain my idea, recommendation, solution, etc....”* Doing this creates open-mindedness on the part of the decision maker and gives you the opportunity to make a solid business case for your idea, recommendation, solution, etc.

Finally you have to consider what you and the other person have in common at this point in the process. You are there to get a decision and they are there to make a decision. You would like that decision to be “yes” but you need to be able to live with a “well-informed no” also. If you go in looking for “yes” only you have put yourself in a win-lose situation. By going in looking for a well-informed “Yes or No” you will put yourself and the other person in a win-win position and eliminate a whole lot of initial resistance. So putting it all together it sounds like:

“Boss, I’ve got some ideas that will make the XYZ project more successful. I’d like to explain them so you can decide if they will improve our results.”

Obviously, there is a great deal more to improving the communications skills of project team members but beginning your discussions with effective common goals is a great way to insure you will be heard.

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