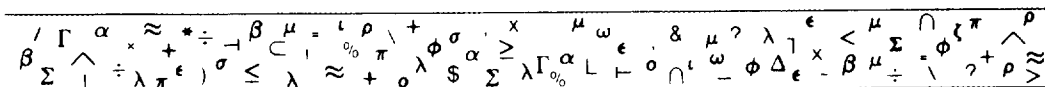


People Skills: How to Improve the Odds of a Successful Project Implementation

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Experienced project leaders know they must resolve the business, technical, and personnel problems inherent in any change effort to be successful. Three ways to improve the odds of success are to (1) understand the culture of the organization, (2) take a broad, systems view of the problem, and (3) do an organization assessment before recommending any changes.

Understand the Culture

Your solution to an organization's problem, regardless of how good it is, will not stick if it doesn't fit the culture. In fact, it may not even get off the ground if you introduce it poorly.

I remember working on an inventory model for the service function of a major computer manufacturer early in my career. We developed a very good solution to a complex problem, and we were proud of it. It would simplify inventory manage-

ment, reduce carrying costs, and improve the level of service. Top management loved it and wanted it implemented in all branch service centers immediately. How do you think we did it?

We resisted the initial temptation to force the branches to comply. We had seen other staff groups fail because they assumed that people in remote field locations obeyed top management directives the way they did at corporate headquarters. This just wasn't so. In fact, field managers, who were recruited and rewarded for their entrepreneurial ability, were lone rangers. Knowing this, we took a completely different approach.

We asked a small number of the best, most innovative branch managers if they wanted to participate in the first phase of the national implementation. They readily agreed. As the benefits of the new inven-

tory model became clear, the word got around. It was then a simple matter to set up a road show to explain the new model and its benefits to the other branch managers. By pairing one of the successful branch managers with a staff person who understood the inner workings of the model, we were able to provide answers to operational as well as theoretical questions. This approach ensured the success of the road show and the national implementation.

The new inventory system more than met the technical and business requirements management had specified. However, our taking into account the differences between the corporate and field-service cultures in our implementation strategy is what made the project a success.

Take a Systems View

You must take a big-picture perspective in diagnosing any problem. Otherwise you may make the problem worse instead of better. This happens surprisingly often, particularly in large organizations.

A classic situation occurred in a company that had just introduced a state-of-the-art minicomputer. The demand for this product soon far exceeded the company's production capacity. Deliveries of the new machines to customers were delayed. As the demand grew, the quoted lead time grew. Many customers who could not afford to wait cancelled their orders.

Looking at the manufacturing-sales system, we see that the sales problem was actually a manufacturing-capacity problem. Unfortunately for the company, top management saw it differently. The vice-president of sales took the heat for the decline

in revenue. He responded by hiring more sales people. When they began to sell, the results were surprising and disappointing to the company. The increase in orders put more strain on manufacturing and led to still longer delivery delays. More customers decided they couldn't wait the additional time and canceled their orders.

The vice-president of sales was blamed for the failure even though it was not entirely his fault. By not taking a systems view, the company's top management team had made the problem worse instead of better.

Do an Organization Assessment

Many projects fail because the project leader accepts the client's initial diagnosis of the problem and what to do about it. "These people are lazy. Automation is the only way to regain our competitive edge." "The problem is X. We need a training program to solve it." "I want you to change my organization by doing Y." Accept any of these assignments at face value and your odds of success plummet.

A better approach is to treat the initial

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diagnosis as a tentative hypothesis and to conduct an organization assessment to confirm it or to identify the real problem. This formal diagnostic process involves interviewing managers and employees to determine their views of the problem and what to do about it.

There are five keys to conducting a good organization assessment. First, take a systems view. Ask questions about both the

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organization and the larger system of which it is a part. Second, don't restrict yourself to questions about the technical or business aspects of the problem. Ask about people issues as well. For example, ask if there are any major conflicts among stakeholders that contribute to the problem. To be complete, your solution must address such issues. Third, listen to what people say. You are there to learn from them, not impress them. Fourth, answer everyone's questions honestly, but keep privileged information confidential. "I'm sorry but I can't answer that question" is always an acceptable answer.

Finally, validate the data you collect. The data is not yours. It belongs to the organization. Your job is to consolidate it in a way that preserves the anonymity of the interviewees. You then feed it back in a way that allows people to validate it and work with you to solve the real problems it reveals.

Conclusion

Large-scale change efforts often fail. To improve the odds of successfully implementing your next major project, (1) develop an implementation strategy that fits the organization's culture, (2) take a systems view to avoid making the problem worse instead of better, and (3) involve the people affected by the change in the process of diagnosing and solving the problem.