



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Project Precious?

Project management...what's behind the chocolate coating?

Key Learnings:

- Recognize the importance of choosing and sustaining projects
- Review key points that help prevent failure of project
- Recognize the importance of leadership in managing projects
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- Review key leadership skills required for successful project management
- Recognize the key differences in traits of fire fighters and fire-lighters

Let us make a sweet beginning. A father used to present his daughter a beautifully wrapped box of heart shaped Belgian chocolates on every Thanksgiving Day. Each and every piece looked deliciously yummy from the outside. Now the little girl was quite choosy when it came to the filling inside the chocolates. She only ate chocolates with marshmallow, chocolate and nuts filling and rejected those with fruit and coconut filling.

Now, cut back to the business scenario. To remain competitive and improve performance efficiencies constantly, companies should alter strategies, enhance capacity, introduce new technology or restructure themselves. This requires maintaining a balance between ongoing requirements of the marketplace (operations) and a company's need to position itself better. This balance can be implemented through business improvement projects.

Being choosy is not beneficial always!

Now, many companies are like the little girl when it comes to choosing business improvement initiatives. Projects are treated like a box of chocolates and companies select the ones that appear to be perfect from outside. However, upon cracking the surface they may find the project is not exactly what they expected. The enthusiasm with which they started off initially gradually erodes and sooner or later, they abandon the project.

One such company identified a project that could save it nearly one million dollars annually. It began the project with enthusiasm but found it was more complex and tricky than expected and soon abandoned it. Many years down the line, the project still remains untouched translating to several millions down the drain for the company!

Overcome misconceptions!

A strong belief about projects is that planned results can be achieved by using a combination of resources, skilled people and appropriate methods. As in the case of the box of chocolates, there may be several unexpected challenges. Unexpected events disrupt schedules and trigger outcomes that hinder original plans. Many unforeseen



TenStep Supplemental Paper

events occur which cannot be predicted even by the most astute project planners. Sometimes even the best planning attempts may be subject to mistakes or oversights.

Remember, the first improvement idea may not solve a problem. Often, it is only after beginning a project that a company realizes there are many more loose ends than it had expected. A company may have to involve several departments to resolve what initially looked like a seemingly simple problem. After cracking the surface of a project a company may realize how complex it is with resource requirements exceeding projections.

How can companies ensure that their projects are not abandoned halfway? Here are a few steps:

1. **Try, try and try again:** Despite beginning a project with great enthusiasm, team members gradually develop a sinking feeling due to unexpected issues. They soon think in terms of abandoning the project. This is the time to try again. The project team has to take time to map out the project again and clearly analyze costs and likely benefits. If there is scope for substantial financial benefits, a realistic plan can be drawn up to secure these benefits. This helps in overcoming the initial doubts and keeps the team focused.
2. **Get help when required:** If the project can bring ROI of say one million dollars annually, it is better to spend one million dollars to complete it. Abandoning good projects due to unexpected costs and resource requirements after cracking the surface is not the solution. A company could seek external help. This is definitely not a sign of weakness, but a way to get work done.
3. **Do not let ideas slip away:** Often companies come across good project ideas but are unprepared to tackle them immediately due to time and resource constraints. Sadly, these are forgotten and lost with time. Hence, it is important to record such ideas and review them regularly to be started at an appropriate time. One way could be by setting deadlines for commencing such projects and starting preparations.

Next we look at another important aspect in project control, namely project leadership. Now regardless of several software tools and other project control mechanisms available today, project control remains dependant on leadership.

It is important that the leadership style is outcome-focused and not problem-focused. When problems arise, they generally trigger reactive behaviors with a focus on tackling immediate problems. Companies need to come out of this fire-fighting mode. To focus on outcomes rather than problems, companies need proactive project leaders who anticipate events and try to prevent problems. Such leaders form a complete contrast to conventional fire fighters, and they are appropriately called firefighters.

Right leadership

Most manufacturing companies today find themselves in a complex situation. On one side, they have advantages like higher quality resources, improved people skills, innovative methods and instant, globally networked communications. On the other hand,

TenStep Supplemental Paper

they have to keep abreast in innovation and technological advancements withstanding competition and exacting consumer demands. All these demand constant changes in a company.

Under such circumstances, projects are considered the 'agents of change' and project management processes gain high importance. Now managing projects is not a simple task. Undoubtedly, a leader alone cannot run a project. Moreover, it is not just experience and technical skills of a project leader that are important, but also leadership abilities. To begin with, we look at the problems that plague a leader and the unintended consequences that are triggered.

Stop fighting fires!

Complexity of issues, inter-connectedness of resource allocation decisions and unforeseen events change the very course of a project. This can happen even when it is mid-way. This often intrudes on the leader's capacity to keep the project to plan and achieve set goals.

Diagnostic systems like software applications undoubtedly track such deviations. However, project leaders often respond to such events by looking for 'quick fix' solutions. In most companies, one crisis leads to another and the leader becomes more engrossed in fighting fires. Once entangled in this vicious cycle, fire fighters respond in two patterns. They address problems actively as diagnostic tools identify them. Or they wait for problems to become so obvious they can no longer be ignored. Either approach is reactive.

When more problems persist and hinder progress, fire fighters tend to ignore them gradually and avoid decision-making. Some fire fighters actively track deviations from expected standards and react (management by exception - active). Some others take action only when problems in a project become chronic (management by exception - passive).

Lighting the fire!

Having a committed and proactive leader alone cannot guarantee success. Instead, the leader should evoke passion as well as reason among team members. Such proactive leadership entails an emotional and cognitive commitment from every member in the team. In line with the metaphor of a reactive leader being termed a 'fire fighter', a proactive leader is termed a 'firelighter'. In times of crisis, a fire lighter not only energizes the team, but also envisions an altered but achievable future.

In any company, a project cannot be implemented successfully in isolation. In fact, the leader has to interact with other areas of the business and visualize the 'big picture'. As fire lighter, a leader has to communicate this picture, value of project outcomes and the means to achieve them to the team. A fire lighter can connect daily problem solving with planned strategies that circumvent foreseeable problems and align a project's progress with important outcomes.

To be a fire lighter

TenStep Supplemental Paper

One of the key traits of being a fire lighter is the ability to combine transformational and maintenance leadership behaviors. Transformational leadership behavior involves igniting people's imagination and motivation. In order to ensure purposeful action, fire lighters have to exhibit behaviors that motivate team members to make constructive efforts voluntarily. Such a leader sets basic expectations and goals and rewards team members accordingly. This also highlights a combination of task-oriented and people-supportive behaviors.

A fire lighter does not limit his role to project milestones but involves himself in routine maintenance of the project. This gives a real time picture of cost, quality and time control in the project. Team members are unlikely to have a vision if the leader is unable to organize daily project tasks. He also has to support them through setbacks encountered day after day. This maintenance behavior clarifies tasks, assigns responsibilities and provides a structure for problem solving. Such a leader also assists team members in fulfilling their personal needs and ambitions.

The combined effect of transformational and maintenance behaviors establishes the foundation of credibility in the leader's competence.

The essence

Fire lighters are leaders who 'stimulate' followers to innovate by questioning assumptions, reframing problems and replacing old methods with new ones. Here are the four key traits that highlight the essence of a fire lighter:

- *Idealized influence:* By which the leader instills pride, faith and respect; transmits a sense of mission and can sense what is important for the team.
- *Individualized consideration:* Whereby the leader facilitates experimental learning by delegating vital tasks and providing ample guidance apart from giving apt consideration of individual opinions and actions.
- *Inspirational motivation:* The leader inspires passion and energizes the team through his actions to work and achieve the mission
- *Intellectual stimulation:* The leader stimulates followers to think in new and unconventional ways to tackle problems, propagates the use of reasoning and planning before taking any action.

Considering human nature, a project leader cannot always be a fire lighter. Many times the leader has to resort to some fire fighting also, due to extreme or unavoidable reasons. However, in most situations, they will align largely towards a combination of transformational and maintenance behaviors and light the fire!