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TenStep Supplemental Paper

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20 April 2002

How to Gain Credit for Project Success

A reader of www.TenStep.com posed a question that may apply to others as well. He said that through a combination of hard work, luck, and executive turnover, he was appointed the IT Director at his company, reporting to the CFO. His first order of business was to deal with a critical project that was all but dead. The project team was constantly setting dates for reaching milestones, and then consistently missing the dates, perhaps because of the inexperience and the unrealistic dates set by the lead developer. The reader said that he put in a lot of time and sweat dealing with the client managers and the project team. Just as the project was on the verge of being canceled, the team started to turn it around.

Now that the project is finally completed, the company is, in fact, getting valuable business benefits from the work. However, now it seems people are coming out of the woodwork to take credit for it. In some instances, they appear to be successfully gaining credit and recognition for only marginal contributions. The reader was worried that all the effort he and a few others put in could end up meaning nothing. He asked how he could make sure that they get recognized for the hard work and sleepless nights they put in to make this project successful.

The Background Sounds Familiar

The story rings true to me because I was in a similar situation years ago in my career. I was a 28 year old, successful contractor at a major consulting company. Through a combination of hard work and luck, I was offered a position as the manager of a branch office. This included hiring and firing authority, profit and loss, etc. I was in charge, reporting to a remote manager 500 miles away. If the truth were told, I was not entirely ready and had to learn fast. I made some mistakes. However, the experience gained during that timeframe has helped me ever since in my career. For one thing, after living through that job, I can honestly say that I have never been intimidated by any other challenge I have faced since.

Look at Long-Term Learnings and Experience

The reader is in the same position. If he thinks that management is the direction he wants his career to take, he will have this position and experience on his resume forever. If he leaves his company, he can probably land a new position much higher up than he might have otherwise. What has he learned? He has learned how not to do things. He has learned what he would do differently next time. He has learned how to deal with senior managers. He has learned how to better manage projects. He has acquired some management techniques that were successful that he can apply in the future. I think he has learned a lot, even though he may not appreciate all of it until later.

Gaining experience that will help his career in the long-term is fine, but what about the short-term? How can he gain the proper level of recognition for this recently completed project? There is not necessarily just one answer. This also gets a little dicey because there is not a specific set of processes and techniques you can use. Getting credit for your

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accomplishments may require some politics and self-promotion. By its nature, politics involves people and circumstances that are different in every situation. Part of the challenge is to evaluate the people and circumstances that you find yourself in to see how best to proceed. If you were in a similar situation, there are a couple steps that might be appropriate.

Evaluate Your Role on the Project

First, start with an honest evaluation of your role and your contributions on this project. You deserve to get credit where credit is earned. But do not take credit for other people's work, and do not take credit for things that other people perceive as failures. There is more to this than just stating that you worked long and hard and now the project is turning around. What did you specifically do that caused the turnaround? For instance, did you provide more resources at critical times to hit your end-dates? Did you push the clients to take more active ownership? Did you have the entire project re-estimated so that there was a clearer idea of effort and cost? Did you keep team morale high when the project was at its lowest?

Communication is the Key

Second, communication is a key ingredient that you want to utilize in your favor. Fortunately, as a Director, or a manager in the direct chain of command, you would be in a good position to exercise some control over the communication flow from the project. You can leverage this to maximize the exposure for your role. One idea is to begin a formal status to your managers and stakeholders on a weekly basis. Even though the system has just gone into production, you can still use status reports to stress the performance of the application and the accomplishments of the team, including your own. Make sure you point out issues that you helped resolve, risks that you helped mitigate, morale boosting events that you sponsored, etc. Also, look for opportunities to stress your role on the project from a historical perspective. For instance, if you discuss team morale, point out how bad morale was earlier, and how much it has improved based on your actions. On the surface, this communication is meant to inform on current status. But under the surface you are trying to show the value you are providing today and the role you played in the past. Of course, from a political perspective you must be subtle. If the communication appears to be a forum for you to pat yourself on the back, then it will backfire and turn people off.

In addition, also look for opportunities for personal dialog along these same lines with the Controller, CFO, and other stakeholders. If you do not have regular meetings with them, try to catch them informally. Let them know the status of the system, and always tie it to what you are doing to help it along. Of course, be subtle.

Part of the reason that you may not be getting the credit you deserve is that others may still see you as a technician, based on your prior role in the company. Part of getting out of that perception is showing confidence in your management ability, having the respect of your own staff, being seen as a leader, and being able to discuss business issues

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without technical jargon. If you need help with these kinds of skills, look for training opportunities.

Summary

In conclusion, look for opportunities to take credit where credit is due. If others are taking credit for accomplishments they were not involved in - challenge them. The challenge can be as simple as asking them what they did that contributed to the accomplishment. Remember that much of politics is communication – getting your message to the right people at the right time.

There is an old joke about the various stages of a project. I believe the last stage is 'praise and rewards to the non-participants'. Sometimes it can actually happen that way. If you see that happening to you, be proactive. Get your story out there, and remember to bring your team along with you. The best managers make sure that their teams get all the credit, while at the same time making sure people understand that none of it would have happened without their active involvement.

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