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Project Management: Calming the Chaos

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Take a moment to recall a project (change initiative) that you were involved in ... how did it go? Was it smooth sailing or was there carnage along the way? (Pretty graphic, but you get my drift!) Was it successful? If you answered YES to this, whose definition of success was used as a measuring stick?

I'd like to tell you about a really big, really important project. But not all the key decision-makers knew the same key information ... bad mistake!

A large international company had a subsidiary that it wanted to sell. One condition was that the subsidiary complete its multinational implementation of its new sales software. This information was not broadcast broadly—actually it wasn't even broadcast narrowly.

The project manager (PM) was told of this strictly confidential condition of sale. The country managers were unfortunately not told. The PM was told that success was getting the software installed in all countries in which the multinational operated ... whereas the country managers defined success as getting what they wanted as part of the software implementation.

As you can imagine, this truly was a no-win project. Fast-forward to the end of the story: The subsidiary was sold as the condition of sale was met. The executives and the project team were relieved that they fulfilled the condition, which resulted in the successful M&A transaction. But, the country managers and their staff were dismayed with the utter failure of the project, as they did not get what they wanted as part of the software implementation. The end result was that the project was over budget and various key deadlines were missed along the way, which caused even more budget overruns. And a significant amount of rework was required by the new owners to make the system function effectively. Just imagine how different this story could have ended!

Lessons learned in this story: What worked well? What didn't work well? What could have calmed the chaos?

The PM and his team followed a solid project methodology: starting with the *initiation phase* (defining the need for the project), followed by thorough *planning* and *execution phases*, ending with a *wrap-up* celebration that the company had fulfilled its condition of sale.

The *initiation phase* is the critical component of any change initiative. The more compelling the reason for the change, the more easily the change will be accepted. This lays the groundwork for all the other phases—it's either a strong foundation or a weak one. It's really that simple.

This story shows how critical the impetus for change was, as the sale of the subsidiary was riding on this. However, excluding the right people (country managers) with the right information (condition of sale) created chaos that could have been avoided. Without knowing this key compelling reason for the change, the country managers and their teams chose to avoid the change both passively (pretend it's not needed or that it's not happening) and actively (fight it).

What was missing? Communication, trust, a common goal, and a common definition of success versus different motives for the change (from a "what's in it for me" perspective).

What could have calmed the chaos? People want to be valued. People want to be heard. People want to be part of a winning team. Communication is key to calming the chaos. Communication could have closed the gap for almost all the missing pieces. The country managers needed to be able to understand the criticality of getting the software implementation completed. One simple way of extending the confidential information to the country managers could have been through an internal non-disclosure agreement (NDA).

But what about trust? Trust can't be handled through signing a legal document. It's something that takes a long time to establish. Like Stephen Covey (author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) suggests, an emotional bank account is a necessary component of every healthy relationship—both professional and personal relationships. It takes a long time to build up a robust balance in the emotional bank account, but this can get eroded oh-so-quickly through a single action.

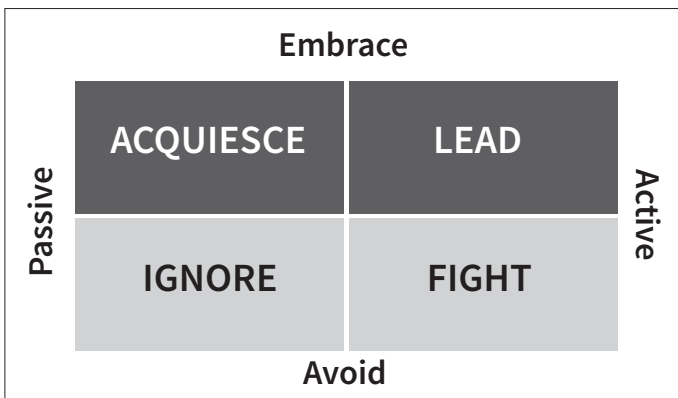
Imagine how this story could have ended if all stakeholders felt valued and trusted and were driven by the same compelling reason.

Figure 1 shows both the positive and negative ways that people can choose to deal with change initiatives. The country



managers chose avoidance—both passive and active avoidance. Imagine how different things would have felt for them if they were part of the inner circle, if they knew the compelling reason, the need for the quick software implementation? The country managers would more likely have embraced the change, supported it, and become effective change leaders with their staff.

Figure 1
Positive and Negative Ways to Cope With Change Initiatives



The *planning phase* is both an art and a science. Some advice here is to hope for the best but plan for the worst. Well not quite, but there is huge value in building a buffer into the components of the project where there is the most uncertainty. For example, when building a house, below ground has the highest degree of uncertainty as you don't know what is sub-surface until you start digging.

The most common project tools to set up in the planning phase—and then to use/review/edit during the execution phase—are designed to help all interested parties know how the project is tracking versus plan. These tools include:

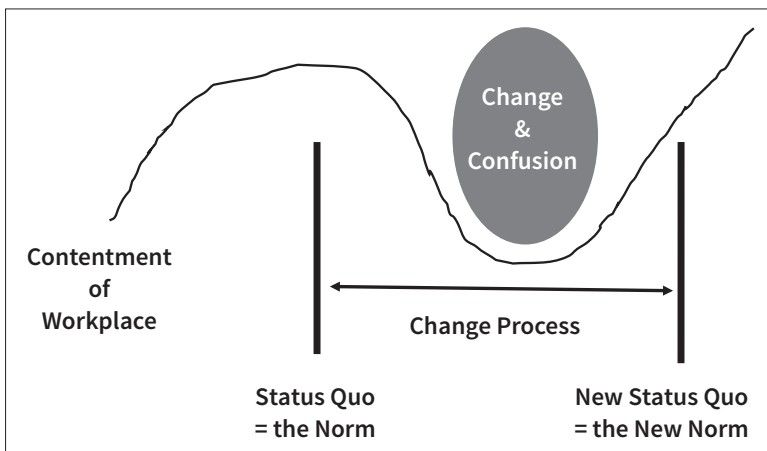
- Clear project plan with clear responsibilities and clear deadlines and clear milestones
- Budget of hours/days and dollars
- Communication strategy to make sure that each stakeholder group is getting the right information at the right time
- Escalation strategy that outlines how impasses are handled throughout the project



- Critical path map that informs the required sequence of project activities to optimize the chances of a successful—on time and on budget—deliverable

The *execution phase* is in many ways the easiest part of a project, but first the foundation has to be established in the initiation phase with a strong compelling reason. Project sponsors (executives in charge of the project) need to successfully rally the troops around them into one cohesive team, with one common definition of success ... then, and only then, will the execution phase be made simple.

Figure 2
Emotional-Rollercoaster-of-Change Life Cycle



Even when all the project tools are in place and working effectively, there is a need to recognize the life cycle of a project, as depicted by the Figure 2. Even when a project is running smoothly, many people will cling to status quo.

There is a point in each project called the “valley of tears” where people recognize that they can no longer cling to status quo. An effective communication strategy will recognize the need for stakeholders to feel seen, heard and understood during this low point. An effective communication strategy will help all stakeholders recognize that there is something valuable in their new post-change world. After enough time has passed with the new change in place, the new world becomes the new status quo, which will be clung to the next time a change is introduced.

The *wrap-up phase* is a hugely critical component of any learning organization. This is where we focus on the important

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versus the urgent. Covey covers this concept in his book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, indicating that as we make a disciplined attempt to focus on the important activities, we reduce tasks that become urgent. Conversely, if organizations choose to not spend time learning during the wrap-up phase of a change initiative, then future projects may end up increasing their urgent tasks ... an avoidable result!

A thorough wrap-up phase lays the groundwork for greater successes in subsequent projects. It’s easy to ignore this phase, but it’s hugely valuable to embrace it. Learn from what you’ve just gone through. Learn from what you did well. Learn from what you didn’t do as well as you would like. And celebrate that you got your stakeholders into the beginning of a new status quo. ■

Editor’s note: Watch for the next article in this series, in which Doris will share key insights to ensure true success for your projects—success for your organization, your people and you.



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