Five Things That Derail Improvement Projects and One Thing That Always Works

Projects that aim to achieve significant business improvement can be highly complex and difficult, and all too often they fail to produce the intended benefits. In many cases the ultimate failure is an outcome of poor planning and poor organization in the early stages of the project. If you want your project to succeed, make sure to give it a solid foundation and avoid issues that can eventually undermine its success.

1. Hidden Assumptions

Assumptions are frequently so embedded in thought processes and terminology that people fail to recognize them – and fail to recognize when other people have different assumptions.

For instance, when you say "improve" or "customer," do other people think it means the same thing you do? How do you know? If the goal of the project is to make a process "more effective," what exactly does that mean for all the people and activities involved in the process? Does everyone include the same activities as part of "the process" and agree who's involved? Do you all agree what metrics should be used to assess "effectiveness"? What about the qualitative elements – are those defined and agreed upon?

Any assumption and unrecognized ambiguity that remains unexamined is likely to emerge eventually in the form of serious problems and disagreements later on.

2. Undefined Requirements

The definition phase of a project is critical: successful achievement of project goals is impossible if those goals have not been clearly identified. Project requirements need to be gathered **thoroughly** up front. What does the project need to achieve for the business? What do people need in order to perform their tasks? Who are the stakeholders who are core to the process, and who else will be impacted? Requirements should be gathered broadly from all the project constituents, including staff level users. If an IT system is to be involved, how will it be used to contribute to project goals?

As with assumptions, clarity around definitions and requirements, and agreement on specifics are a precondition for success.

3. Upstream/Downstream Impacts

What business functions will be affected by your project? What data, supply and finance streams does it depend on or feed into? It's essential to identify them all – upstream as well as downstream, both internal and external – and to identify and involve all the relevant stakeholders as early as possible.

Follow the connections in both directions to discover dependencies and impacts. This may include external suppliers and customers. Whose activities will be affected?

What systems will have to provide or receive data? If changes will be needed to coordinate with your project, are they willing and able to do so? They may need time for a complementary project of their own to accommodate the change. And if they're not willing to do it, better that you should find out early than sink big money in a project that's going to blow up your supply chain or wreck your accounting.

4. Incompatible Goals

Stakeholders with disagreements and incompatible goals can make it impossible for a project to get to the finish line. Even if the problem is just a clash of egos or personalities it can cause big trouble, especially if they have clout in the organization. And it may honestly not be possible for everyone to get what they want out of the project. Ignoring this kind of problem won't make it go away. Instead, take it seriously, and take conflict resolution steps quickly. Remember – compromise isn't necessarily a bad thing. Keep your champions informed and engaged, so disgruntled stakeholders aren't free to sabotage you. And be prepared to scale back the project's goals or redirect its focus if agreement with key parties is impossible.

5. Premature Commitment

You can't build a good solution before you really understand the problem. It's tempting to commit to tools or platforms that promise to solve all your problems with a cherry on top, but if you commit to one before you really know in detail what you need it to do, you may find yourself deep in sunk costs with a tool that lacks what turn out to be core capabilities for your true solution. If you find yourself in this situation, or if you're forced (e.g. by corporate standards or supply chain requirements) to use a tool you would not have chosen otherwise, you'll need to learn its deficits as soon as possible to build around them.

Winning Strategy: Engage the Influencers Early

One project element that is always part of a successful improvement is a systematic approach to change management that recognizes the need to build it into the project from the outset and prioritizes the need to build support for the effort that is both wide and deep. Change management is not just for technical issues. Persuasive communication targeted where it will have the most impact is a vital component.

So keep all the stakeholders in the loop throughout the project. And make sure you identify the key influencers in your organization, both those with relevant positional authority and those whose opinions have weight unrelated to their place in the org chart, and keep them actively engaged in your project's success throughout its duration. Build a sense of urgency and ownership, and you'll have important support to get to your goal.

© *Performance Plus, Inc.*