Managing Success and Failure

After 20+ years of managing teams and teaching our Managing Success training program in many corporations, the tool I find myself turning to the most would have to be GRPI. Gaining clarity and commitment from team members on the Goal(s) of the work, Roles and Responsibilities of team members, Process for working together and for decision making and Interpersonal Agreements for how we will work together, has proven to be a recipe for team success when in place. I always refer to this tool when kicking off new projects with any team. So, I was recently shocked when a high visibility project I was working on with a client went sideways.

The approach of working with this cross-functional team - comprised of mostly volunteers - started out on a high note. We had established the GRPI and were working hard to deliver a great result. Even though the majority of employees within the client organization were volunteering their time outside their day jobs, they were all motivated to contribute. I was confident that the project's development would go off without a hitch, but I failed to anticipate the curveball that was thrown at me next.

Early in the project's construction, the team's appointed leader was replaced by someone who lacked a history with the project. This became an issue when there was growing confusion surrounding team roles, expectations and the plan for deliverables. We adapted to timeframe changes for deliverables based on client requests during weekly calls, which meant delaying other deliverables.

We pushed forward, adapting to change requests but never pausing to re-evaluate the established GRPI. There was some confusion on the work process for getting things done, however no one directly voiced their confusion. We just kept plowing forward, until one day, an internal team member complained to the new leader that we were not delivering what was expected on time. As you can imagine, the client team leader was not happy. As a result of the confusion and missteps, we arrived for our weekly call and were shocked when the new team leader proceeded to put us "on notice" and ask that we create a recovery plan for getting the work back on track.

So, what went wrong? We had a shared compelling goal, and there was motivation and alignment from everyone early in the project. We kept adapting as the new leader came onto the project, we were working hard, but we lost sight of the fact that any time there is a new team player (especially a new leader) we should pause and re-establish clarity and commitment to the GRPI. We also failed to pick up on the subtle cues that individuals on the team were confused about the work process. When we started to go into a vicious cycle of revisions, we failed to pause and realize that it was a sign of undefined decision making processes. We failed to pay attention to the subtle, soft skills stuff that inevitably brings projects down.

The good news about failing or almost failing, is that it can provide a rich environment for learning and focused action. We did manage to do both with this project and while the client is now happy and the deliverables have been completed at a high quality, the process of getting there will hopefully not be repeated. The experience reinforced in my mind that no matter how long we do something, if we lose sight of the basics then bad things can happen. It is *always* important to ask yourself the following questions when working on a project with a team:

- Is everyone clear and committed to the project GRPI?
- Are there clear decision making processes established?
- Are there any signs of confusion or resistance from any team member that needs to be addressed?

I hope that my experiences will support all of us in creating the best team results possible. You can also refer to this tool on my website, which will be available to view and utilize starting on September 3rd:

OBC: Team Effectiveness Tool

Badlands National Park, South Dakota

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