Process Improvement Mud Bogging

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Everyone has experienced that frustration of a project, design, new product, new process, new template, or some fix or improvement of any kind getting stuck and going nowhere. The worst thing we can do is let that betterment lie in the stuck state. It hurts on too many levels.

At an objective business level, a stuck project is a resource drain, even if no one is really putting any effort to it. At some level someone is assigned to that project and is supposed to be working on it. If they are not, then we either have a resource with time and energy available to work on something else, or we have another type of resource allocation problem. Either way, we have a problem.

At a leadership level, stalled or stuck projects are morale destroyers. Our people lose faith in our leadership and the objectives and goals we set forth when they watch projects, important or not, sit in the mud and spin. The whole leadership team loses credibility as personnel sit and watch a project starve in the wasteland.

On a personal level, anyone associated with a project that is just sitting gets a blemish. Pointing fingers at everyone else associated with the project only makes the “black spot” bolder. We should all abhor being associated with a stuck project.

Dedicated process improvement agents or change agents are at greatest risk. Change agents are often held responsible for facilitating change and making improvements happen. Unfortunately, we change agents don’t typically have the direct authority to tell a process owner to do things the way we want or when we want. We are facilitators, not command and control dictators.

As a result, change agents are often faced with a dilemma in which they are rushed to make a change happen, while the process owner is not for a wide variety of reasons. There are things that a change agent, or any other team member, can do to deal with a stuck project. The option of letting it stay stuck should not be considered.

A change agent that cannot not remove roadblocks and get changes done loses everything. Leadership loses faith in that change agent’s skills and capabilities; personnel lose trust in the change agent’s assurances that life will be better if they agree to adjust behavior and adopt a new method or process; and the business loses the benefits of the change. Personally, change agents lose a little interest in the job and possibly confidence within themselves. In short, it’s their death knell.

Guess what? We don’t have to be business analysts, dedicated change agents, Lean experts, or Six Sigma Black Belts to fall into this trap. Any of us assigned a task can end up hearing the funeral bells ringing if that task stalls long enough.

If your project ends up in the mud, going nowhere, for any reason, do not just leave it there and watch it rust along with everyone else. Do something.

Do what? There are three basic tactics to deal with the bogged project:

1. Call for help.
2. Identify and negotiate roadblock removal.
3. Request cancellation.

The first thing is a quick root cause analysis to determine why the project is stalled. If it is stalled because the people assigned are too busy and it has lost priority, make the call for help. Identify the help you need and go ask for it. Do this earnestly and with great noise. Do not leave an impression that you did not try to get your project back on the road.

If the problem is that someone, or some other project, resource, or issue is preventing your change or effort from moving forward, make every effort to remove the roadblock. The key to doing this is to first understand the nature of the roadblock.

If the roadblock is a problem, resource, or issue, it may be that your solution is not well designed or adapted to the reality of your environment or your business or your skills, resources, or processes. Re-evaluate your solution and see if some adjustment or a redesign is necessary.

If the roadblock is a person, again seek to understand that person’s reason for preventing, avoiding, or procrastinating. Sometimes they are concerned or afraid, or they just don’t understand. Sometimes their concerns are very valid and our solutions don’t address them properly. Regardless, if our efforts are being blocked, the key to negotiating progress is to understanding why.

Sometimes our changes, designs, solutions, or projects just become overcome by events or other priorities. They become unimportant compared to the other efforts that are utilizing resources. It happens. When it does, ask that the project be cancelled.

Again, make your request firmly with good explanation and recommendations, and do it noisily. No one likes asking for his or her own project to be cancelled. However, when we do, we have at the very least demonstrated our observance of the greater picture, and we have acted decisively. It is better to be decisive than be perceived as unable to make progress with our responsibilities.

I find that the best way to propose the cancellation is to point out that the effort is no longer a priority and isn't going to be completed as long as resources are working other problems, and then ask to cancel it so that we can focus on another effort that is a priority. Of course we should identify and request that effort specifically. We can always hit the save button and pick a project back up again if the need or priority returns.

Sometimes requesting cancellation is a wake-up call that breaks free the resources or helps remove the roadblocks. Sometimes, though, even when it's the right thing to do, our requests are denied and we are instructed to finish it anyway, without satisfactory resolution of the priority or resource or roadblock issue. We know these as "pet" projects.

Don't get angry; just take it in stride. Use the desire to finish the project as a springboard to re-invigorate the discussion over resources to complete the project, or the removal of roadblocks. Bring solutions, not problems or complaints. No one wants to hear complaints from a project leader. Leaders don't complain; they solve problems.

If the problem remains and the project cannot be put back on the road, repeat the process of addressing the stall. Make the call for help, address the roadblocks, and if you are still stuck, request again for cancellation and to be put on something that is set up to succeed. Eventually, the problem should be resolved, and throughout it all, you are more likely to be perceived as a problem solver than someone who can't get things done.

There is one more challenge to overcome on this topic. What if we end up on mud bogged projects over and over? I know this problem personally. We must be proactive about ensuring we are set up for success instead of failure.

One hint, is to ensure that your project plan is staged to complete, and can complete, before the end of your business' planning year. It seems that priorities and leaders tend to turn over around the first quarter of the year in most corporations and large businesses. This is when our projects will find themselves tossed to the bottom of the priority list. Get them done, or at least an effective phase of them done before the turnover.

Second, be very communicative with your manager or executive leader. Before the project kicks off, discuss carefully how the project is set for success and what the perceived priorities are among the different players. Discuss roadblocks that you can see coming before they arrive and inform your leaders beforehand that you will need their assistance in removing them.

Being proactive is the best way to keep out of the stall zone or mud bog. Sometimes we can’t avoid the stall. When our efforts do stall, do not let them be. Do something. Call for help and remove the roadblocks first. If those efforts fail, ask for cancellation of the project. It’s better to be decisive than perceived as unable. A reputation that we cannot get a project finished is a disaster.

Stay wise, friends.

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