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Six professional strategies: How to generate acceptance from project stakeholders!

Resistance - is okay!

The content in brief: Many projects fail because of opposition from the project environment. Various stakeholders have resistance towards to a project because they fear that the project induces undesirable changes. The task of the project manager: to obtain acceptance and support for his project. Project professional Thomas Waldorf explains six success strategies for communicating strategically and finding compromises.

The junior project leader faced unexpected resistance to his plans: His mandate was to merge three departments and streamline the processes. Despite the fact that there were detailed and explicit advantages for the company, there was a notable 'headwind' during the initial discussions at the inception of the project. The project leader received counter-arguments and objections towards the proposed changes, the affected employees and departments felt the current organizational constellation and workflows were proven and efficient. Many staff members refused co-operate, absconded from meetings, and the project stalled. After half a year, management stopped the unpopular project. "There was probably a lack of acceptance," the project leader concluded helplessly.

Thomas Waldorf, senior business consultant at next level consulting suggests that this kind of case is not an outlier! More and more projects are failing due to the resistance of stakeholders. Experts estimate that lack of acceptance is one of the most common causes of project failure. Thomas explains, "Projects often affect the interests of many people, and or organisations, these are so-called stakeholders". Projects require the acceptance of their stakeholders to be successful and they require the project manager to consider their (legitimate) demands.

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Thomas Waldorf: "From the position of the stakeholders, resistance is absolutely reasonable, and the only way to protect their interests!" To actively manage these needs project professionals strategically generate acceptance and secure the buy-in of, for example, heads of departments, internal/external organisations and even the public. Thomas Waldorf recommends six strategies to ensure this acceptance right from the start:

First strategy: analyse who is affected by, or interested in the project

Every project has multiple stakeholders. As the project team carefully looks at the project and the parties that are affected by or interested in the outcome of the project endeavour, stakeholders slowly become apparent. Thomas Waldorf warns "While focus is usually on the customer or the public, internal stakeholders, in particular, are often forgotten or underestimated," Well-versed project managers therefore always analyse which groups in the company are directly or indirectly affected by their initiatives. The next steps are to get clarity about the individual groups, how are they affected? What are their interests? What is their anticipated reaction? What patterns are they likely to follow?

Second strategy: explain the background of the project

Projects bring change and change brings opportunities. Unfortunately these opportunities alone will not convince all stakeholders. Providing context around the project rationale and answers to the question why any such change is being carried out is an effective way of generating acceptance. It is only after this is accomplished that one should proceed to answer the question what is actually changing and how the project is to be carried out. "Project managers should explain answers to the question 'Why?' as specific and comprehensible as possible", Thomas Waldorf recommends.

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Third strategy: deal with resistance aptly

Almost every project will face some or other kind of resistance. The ultimate question is how the project manager effectively responds to the resistance in a manner that is appropriate. Thomas Waldorf explains that "Resistance must not be viewed as being unreasonable nor should opposing stakeholders be labelled as bad". Fear often creates defensiveness and insecurity: anxieties about the changing landscape of a familiar environment. Or the fear of being left with the short end of the stick after the project is implemented. In contrast to this, one of the biggest mistakes in addressing resistance is to hold back bad news or to stay silent. Many people have a good gut feeling for reality and or the feeling that something is being concealed. This distrust, causes anxiety and fear increases resistance, hence professional project leaders learn that art of communicating openly about the down-sides of their project.

Fourth strategy: Keeping and developing the good

Many stakeholders are not fundamentally opposed to the novelties of a project. However, they wish that the proven aspects that are good, are preserved. This interest of the "preservers" should not be dismissed by project managers. On the one hand, project managers tend to over-shoot and unnecessarily eliminate good practices. Listening to the insecurities of stakeholders is important. When people feel they are being listened to, they naturally become less defensive. Project leaders need to listen-out for the old and proven things which are worth incorporating into the novelty of the new project. For example, established practices can be incorporated into a change concept and be even improved. "In this way, the project manager gains the sympathy of many "preservers", " says Thomas Waldorf. While communicating with stakeholder, experienced project managers clearly state what is not going to change as a result of the project.

Fifth strategy: rationalize the "valley of tears"

Thomas Waldorf suggests that organizational change projects are time and energy consuming: it takes time until the changes - such as workflows or a new division of departments – start to work smoothly. "Changes create disturbances in an overall balanced

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system". It takes a while before the novelties of a changed system haven stabilized again – and can start operationally function better than before. This time period is called the "valley of tears": the weeks and months in which the promised benefits are fully realised. Experts recommend it is important to brief stakeholders early enough on what to expect in the valley of tears, otherwise the project manager risks losing acceptance.

Sixth strategy: inform individually

As initially discussed, the importance of providing stakeholders the context and background of the project. Even more important, stakeholders want to know how the project will specifically and individually impact their day to day life. From this perspective, it is important that project managers develop a communication plan that specifically addresses the needs of each stakeholder (group). Thomas Waldorf recommends a four-step approach: firstly, explain to each group the elements that will not change around them as a result of the project. Secondly, what will each group will lose as a result of the project. Thirdly, what are the individual benefits of the change? And fourthly, what are the opportunities and advantages overall? For example, for the company or the customer? " Often project managers begin by selling the overall benefits to the company," Thomas explains, " it is strategically better to talk about this only at the end and to cater first to the individual perspectives and needs."

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