

Project Pitfalls: From Symptom to Solution

SYMPTOM
The upcoming steering committee meeting has been rescheduled three times because of various members' commitments elsewhere, and it looks like the new date won't hold either.

CAUSE
APATHY
Leaders lack a sense of urgency about the project's goals and execution.

THREAT
If the business need for the project is urgent, but leaders don't convey that, deadlines will slip and the cost of successful completion—if it remains possible—will increase.

You and the project team have just presented the implementation plan to the senior team. The CEO calls you after the meeting and says, "I'm worried. Somehow the soul of this thing is missing. I just don't think the team gets what we're trying to do."

CONFUSION
Leaders and team members lack a clear image of the goal: how the business should operate once the initiative is complete.

If the people involved in the project aren't crystal clear about its business goal and how people will work differently, you have no foundation for planning, decision-making, or evaluating success. As a result, the project could go way off track without its leaders realizing it until it's nearly completed.

On previous projects, executives were convinced the technology was no good because they were not getting the business results they wanted. Meanwhile, the project team kept insisting it was the fault of the users—despite users' best efforts to work with the new technology.

INSTALLATION MINDSET
Your organization's primary focus is on installing technology, rather than on realizing business results.

Installation—providing systems and training—is necessary but insufficient. *Realization*—producing the expected business benefits—also requires changes in processes, behavior and attitudes. If you focus on installing systems, and devote few resources to *realizing* their benefits, you won't get them, and the project will be judged a failure even if the technology works.

One of your trainers comes back from a session with end-users and says, "You wouldn't believe what just happened: The director told all his direct reports not to worry—if they had problems learning this new system, they could always go back to the old one."

WEAK SPONSORSHIP
Leaders are not providing the support the initiative needs to succeed.

Successful change requires not just one sponsor, but a network of powerful individuals who will give the initiative their full public and private support and be firm with people who fail to do their part in making the project a success. If sponsors skip critical meetings and do not stand behind the project, people will not make the changes the project requires, and it will fail.

You know that the project is having some problems—dates have slipped, and your instincts tell you there's more below the surface. Yet you've just received a status report from your project manager saying everything is moving along smoothly.

UNPREPARED TEAM
The project team lacks the skills and tools needed for success.

If you don't have the people with the skills and experience you need on the team, or they're stretched too thin, key parts of the plan will be executed poorly. In fact, they may not know how to ask the right questions. The result: You may have to redo large parts of the project, which means major time and budget overruns.

You send out a message asking about two dozen "power users" to sign up for a workshop to capture their input. Most of them don't respond, and when you call a couple of them to see if you can get them to show up, they snap at you.

OVERLOAD
The people involved in the initiative can't handle its demands along with everything else they are doing.

There's only so much change people can handle. If participants (including leaders) feel overwhelmed by their workload or the amount of change they must endure, they will lose patience, focus only on the parts that matter to them, or just go through the motions. Their involvement will be superficial, and any changes in how they work will be short-lived.

You're implementing a system that is designed to foster teamwork among your extremely competitive salespeople. Your top salesperson consistently fails to enter data into the system and, what's worse, no one is willing to do anything about it.

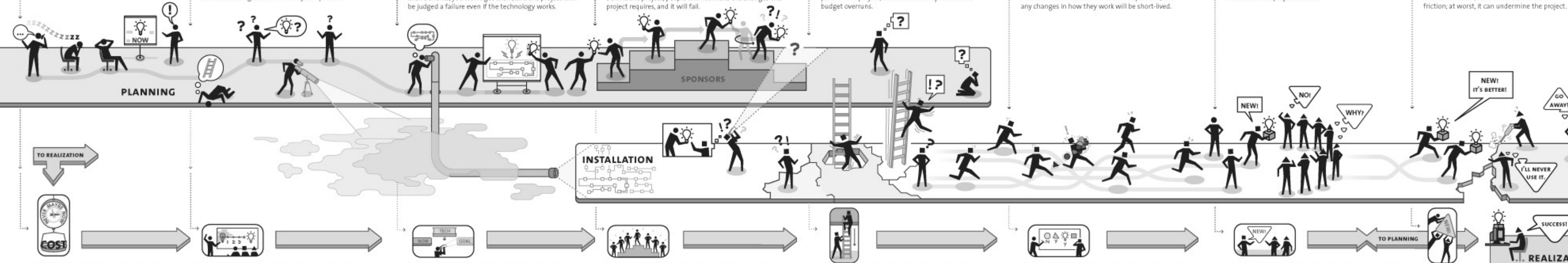
MISALIGNED CULTURE
The initiative's leaders haven't factored the organization's culture into their planning.

In most cases when change conflicts with the culture, the culture prevails. The technology may get installed, but people won't alter their thinking and behavior. Unless the project directly addresses these cultural gaps, the likelihood of realizing the full benefits of the project is small.

Everyone has been screaming for this project for ages. Now that you're finally giving them what they asked for, they're complaining.

RESISTANCE
Leaders fail to effectively anticipate or address resistance, whether open opposition or passive-aggressive behavior.

Even popular initiatives can cause discomfort. People will resist change if they think they can't do what is being asked of them. And even when they can, they'll resist when they don't see a benefit in doing it, or believe it harms their own interests. At best, resistance is a source of friction; at worst, it can undermine the project.



SOLUTION
To light a fire under apathetic leaders, **calculate the cost of the initiative** (including other projects that will not get done) and the cost if it is NOT completed successfully (including ongoing problems and missed opportunities). If the cost of killing the project is unacceptable, make sure all key players understand the consequences for the organization and themselves if it fails. If the cost is acceptable, consider killing it; others may be more urgent.

Identify every group (including customers) with a stake in the project's outcome. Meet with them or their representatives, explain the project's goal and what they need to do to achieve it. Use visualization techniques like scenarios and storytelling to **make your vision of the future vivid and clear**. Summarize it in a brief statement of intent, and share it with everyone involved in the project.

Make sure you **understand what realization will require**. Then, review and adjust your project's goal, plan, metrics and team members to ensure they target business results (not just technical milestones) and how processes and behavior will change. Hold the project team, vendors and consultants accountable for delivering business results, not just for getting the system running.

At each level of management, **identify who needs to be in the network of sponsors** and gauge how strongly they support the change. Talk to the most senior sponsor, agree on what actions that person will take, and have her make sure the next level of leaders takes responsibility for the project's success. Repeat this process until you have reached front-line supervisors.

Make sure the project team has the right people with the mix of skills (including change management), political credibility and clarity of vision they need for success. If you can't get the people you need, revisit "Apathy" and "Weak Sponsorship." Once you have the right team, give them the training, tools and extra resources they need.

Find out what other initiatives the groups affected by your project are involved in, and where your project sits in the priority list. If it ranks low, work with the sponsors of those groups (and *their* sponsors) to ensure it is given appropriate priority. That may mean helping to **determine which other initiatives to delay or terminate**, if possible, time your project to accommodate other demands.

Figure out the attitudes and behavior needed for the project to succeed (e.g., salespeople must see the customer as "our" customer rather than "mine," and freely share information), look for gaps with the current culture, and focus on closing them. **Making your initiative more compatible with the culture**, or breaking the change into small, easily absorbed pieces may be enough. Still, sometimes nothing short of a major cultural shift will do.

Early in the project planning process, **talk with key groups to identify potential sources of resistance**. As the change proceeds, keep talking. Find out what is confusing, scaring and motivating them, and use this knowledge to gain their commitment. If resistance continues, have your sponsors manage behavior by setting out expectations and consequences.