

Leading Capital Projects: The Missing Conversation

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I was leading a session for about 100 people recently and when it was time for the first coffee break, I asked everyone to be back in their chairs in 15 minutes. But it was at least 20 minutes before everyone was back. At the second break, I said, “I need each of you to make a promise to me to be back in your chair in 15 minutes—do you promise?” Everyone said yes. And within 12 minutes every single person was back in their chair.

The only thing that was distinct between the first and the second break was that I had a conversation where I asked people for their promise—their commitment.

It’s also something we see with our clients working on some of the toughest projects in the world, capital projects. The conventional way to manage this kind of huge undertaking is to have a project manager take in all kinds of inputs, then produce a project plan and schedule that entails literally thousands of details, dates, and deliverables. And the conventional way for people on the project to relate to that plan is the way people related to me before the first coffee break: they understand there’s an expectation, but they don’t own the plan as their own. The only person who really feels on the hook for the plan is the project manager who produced it.

A Missing Conversation

There’s a missing conversation that can help leaders translate a project plan into a register of commitments.

It’s a conversation about people committing to the project plan as their word. It’s a basic yet powerful thing: Most people place a lot of value on their word, and if they consider something to be a promise, they want to honor that commitment.

My colleagues and I have found that in certain lines of work relied upon heavily in capital projects—for instance, engineering—this is a fairly new concept. People tend to view the project schedule as a forecast or estimate, because they know there are so many uncertainties and variables at play, and on a large scale. On the other hand, when they are clear they are giving their word about a deliverable, it means something to them and has power.

Underpinning this concept is our observation that there are essentially two types of talking: descriptive and committed. A project plan issued by the project manager in the conventional manner is descriptive: It lists activities and deliverables and states who is supposed to do what. The people whose names are next to deadlines haven’t explicitly committed to the work described. And the project manager ends up chasing people down to get the work done. As with my session break, there is an expectation to deliver, and people do their best, but until they commit there is not a rigorous edge. What difference does five minutes make in the quality of the session? What about a week’s delay in a construction drawing

that other partners on the project are waiting for? In both instances, it's not that people aren't willing to commit to the project, it's that they haven't explicitly done so.

On the other hand, with a project plan built around commitments, the result is far more compelling. For example, recently I worked with a management team creating a plan to ensure a project's success over the next six months. Then when we had the conversation about people promising to come through with their deliverables, the plan changed significantly. Through the lens of giving their word, people were more mindful of what they were promising, and about the details and inter-dependencies that had to be managed if they were going to honor their promise.

Honoring versus Keeping

One possible pitfall we have seen is that when people start giving their word they can be very protective of it, so they are only willing to promise what they can guarantee for delivery.

But that's still a decent starting place. There's also a distinction between keeping your word and honoring it. The reality is that we can't keep our word 100% of the time; it's simply not possible. But we can always honor our word, even if our commitment is challenged. That means acting consistent with your word and being proactive. If you realize something is in jeopardy or you hit an obstacle, you communicate about it. You ask for extra resources, start dealing with the ramifications, and come up with mitigating plans.

For instance, an engineering team I was working with recently called an emergency meeting when one of their

minor deliverables was going to be missed. And they weren't overreacting. With their commitment to the project plan in mind, they knew they should immediately deal with the impact of the near-term delay so that it did not translate to a longer-term delay in the overall schedule.

From a project management perspective, this is a much better operating model than learning of a problem after the fact and being in a reactive stance. When the project manager starts managing commitments versus managing the schedule, you know you are on a path to success.

Playing a Big Game

When we reached the third break at my session the other day, we didn't have to talk about promises again. People understood and honored their word. This is a concept people can latch onto, because there's something about a promise that compels us in a unique way.

Of course if we always kept our promises without fail, we would be making really small promises and playing a small game. Although people operating in the mindset of commitment can be protective of their promises at first, their confidence in their word tends to expand and they naturally begin to feel more comfortable promising more. At the highest level, we see people willing to give their word on a deliverable even if they don't actually know how they will make it happen. They don't have every detail sorted out, but their word begins to have more power to them than the circumstances.

And that's what we call playing a big game. It starts with a conversation. You may only have to have it once, but unless you do, it's missing.

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