Launching a Project?

That Means You're Launching Performance

By Dan Spiwack, *Vice President, JMW Consultants*

Many capital projects, particularly in the infrastructure space, tend to start with some sort of launch session billed as a partnering session. It's become accepted standard practice. And that could be a problem.

When a project launch session is a box to check or a rote and familiar exercise, it probably isn't adding all the value it could—not by a long shot. If you don't have very high expectations about how your project launch will impact your execution, you will likely have a launch session where people go through the motions so they can "get on with it" into the project work.

Jumping in this way, without a powerful initial alignment among all the key players, can have its consequences. In fact, in almost every struggling project, joint venture, or alliance my colleagues and I are brought into, we find ourselves rewinding the project team's focus back to the beginning of the venture to sort out the issues and prejudices that weren't sufficiently addressed at the start.

What kind of launch sessions have you been having? If they seem like business as usual, they probably are, and that won't add a lot or increase your chances for success. But you can make the shift from moderately valuable launch efforts—which may not have a sustained impact—to highly powerful launch efforts with sustained impact into high performance. A strong launch effort is like any foundation you lay: the stronger the foundation, the more solid the structure.

A project launch that leads to high performance demands rigorous thinking and conversation. It's not about saying the "right thing;" it's about addressing the right things and having real conversation up front. The top leaders of a partnership have to align on what they're aiming to accomplish on the project and how they'll do it. That alignment begins with a clarity of vision for success where everyone wins.

Then you have to answer the question: For everyone on the project to win, what will that require? It is fundamental and critical that people are strongly aligned on the answer to that question. Without this alignment, there is no high performance.

Identify undisclosed perceptions, then set commitments

However, as important as this collective alignment may be—and as much as people may agree on this in theory—in reality, it is far easier said than done. So what gets in the way? I can't emphasize this enough: Perception and interpretation win over reality every time - in terms of determining people's actions and behaviors. All people (and project team members are part of "all people") will behave consistent with their perceptions about the people they are working for and with, and about the prospects for the project they are working on. And these perceptions—that determine how people will actually act—very often remain unspoken. That's a problem, because these undisclosed perceptions end up determining much of the project's performance.

It's not uncommon to see a project get started with project team members withholding information important to project execution, posturing to put "a good face" on matters, and people operating from past-based fixed points of view about other key stakeholders. All of these things lead to a weakened project launch.

If you want a powerful start to your project, it's important to identify the mindsets, opinions, and prejudices that may be in the way of the project delivering high performance, and constructively challenge those mindsets, opinions, and prejudices. This type of authentic discussion about the concerns and interests of all the players creates an environment in which senior leaders can agree to a very clear set of commitments.

For example, my colleagues were called in to support a high-stakes oil and gas joint venture that was in danger of not meeting first-phase deadlines for engineering and construction plans—which meant a risk of the project not moving forward at all and millions in investment being lost. It didn't take much conversation with the two lead partners to learn that they held conflicting perspectives about the all-important project schedule that were getting in the way.

People on one side of the venture were making assumptions that the other side had built in "cushion" which made for unnecessarily tight deadlines, and the people on the other side were blaming their counterparts for not being responsive to requests to commit to those deadlines.

We helped this project team get those privately held perceptions on the table, where they could be challenged. That spirit of open challenge prompted people to consider other more constructive ways of seeing each other and the project's future direction. With that change in perception among the team, the project soon turned around. It went from behind-schedule to early approval for construction; from low levels of communication to regular, candid updates about was working and what wasn't; from siloed work channels to a strong, collective effort to rescue the project.

Create an environment for straight talk

In the turnaround I just described, once the people at the top understood the dynamic at play, they were able to create an environment for "straight talk" that established a new way of working across the enterprise. From senior leadership to the rank and file, people were equipped to effectively address issues as needed, and steer the project from a place of jeopardy to one of unprecedented success.

All of this happened because senior leaders began to operate in a new way driven by authentic commitments—along with straightforward updates on those commitments, and interventions as necessary to deal with what's not working. In their new way of working, straight talk was welcomed, respected and encouraged. It's inevitable that there will be problems, but it's never a given that those problems will be handled effectively. Yet if during the launch phase of a project you develop a common language for talking with candor about what's happening, your odds of reliably and successfully intervening increase dramatically.

Essential to this work is establishing a no-blame culture, with clear accountabilities and a work environment where the truth is told about what is and isn't getting done—at all junctures of the project. In doing this work, have people adopt a rigorous relationship to their word, so that commitments are clear and honored; this is key to high performance.

My colleagues worked with the leaders of an alliance building a $600 million highway bypass in Australia. There was a nearly impossible schedule to keep with a myriad of environmental and safety concerns, and none of the key players had ever worked in this kind of partnership before. While observers predicted failure, the leaders engaged JMW to help them build the groundwork for a project that would defy the odds. The project ultimately came in under budget and ahead of schedule, with award-winning quality results.

What happened to allow that performance? We helped the stakeholders agree to a common language for leading and managing the project. In this launch stage work, they set the ground rules for everything from how concerns would be communicated to how leaders throughout the venture would promote an environment focused on results and accountability, not who might be blamed if something didn't go right. It called for an investment of time and energy up front, then resulted in a return on that investment in the form of high performance that set a new bar for the region and the industry.

Build out a roadmap so people see the way

The launch work isn't done until people can see the path beyond the launch. It's important to build out a roadmap for reaching your desired extraordinary goals that will in turn call for high performance. This roadmap lays out some key markers on the path to long-term targets; those markers represent key milestones and interim wins that help establish the pattern and rhythm of high performance.

The roadmap has the most power when people can connect what's in it to what's important to them and the broader venture. You can do this through a strategic cascade of commitments that draws a line of sight from the project's highest level goals and strategic priorities to the actions of individuals and teams. When people have that line of sight, it can be the thing that keeps them motivated later—even inspired—especially when everything isn't going perfectly and the inevitable unexpected obstacles have to be addressed.

And finally, the roadmap will be most useful when it is integrated into your traditional project plan and planning tools. In that way, this powerfully integrated project plan includes all of the usual stage-gated technical activities, plus it also includes the project's more aspirational goals and key milestones drawn through the strategic cascade of commitments.

Focus intensely on inclusion, rigor, and ownership

- **More inclusive is more effective.** The more stakeholders you can involve in the formative stage of a project, the more buy-in they will have for what the project team creates and the more they will contribute. Conversely, if people perceive they've been left out of the process, the likelihood of eliciting high performance from them is low.
- **People's commitments matter.** At this early stage in a project, it's important to bring intense focus to commitments and for people to adopt a rigorous relationship to their word, so that commitments are clear and can be managed effectively. This offers a vital focal point for the early days of the work—when there may be no immediate visible results—and is essential to high performance.

- **Owning just your part isn't good enough.** The most impressive capital project successes my colleagues and I have seen consistently demonstrated a sense of collective accountability for the results. There has been a real sense of "us"—something to which everyone is contributing. As capital projects become more and more complex, it is critical for all groups to take ownership of the whole venture.

Again, this is about a real experience versus a check-the-box exercise. It has been our extensive, repeated experience that the quality of the alignment and momentum that comes out of a candid, thoughtful partnering session are orders of magnitude more powerful than when people are simply going through the motions.

My colleagues and I were recently brought in to conduct a partnering session for a North American infrastructure project. In the midst of implementing the steps I've described here, there was a moment when the people in the room were clearly struck by the nature of the conversation. They said that while the agenda was similar to those of countless partnering sessions they'd had before, it was a distinctly original experience for them.

Why? They said: "Because we're having a real conversation… the kind we never have. We're not saying what we think the other group wants to hear, we're saying what we really think…" These are seasoned, well-credentialed professionals, but it was clear that they weren't accustomed to having the perceptions and interpretations in the background being brought into the foreground—in a safe way where they could deal with them constructively. These project veterans were shocked because they had never had such an experience.

The moment that made the difference? When we asked them to consider the radical idea of telling the truth rather than posturing to protect or defend their position.

If you've ever been involved in a powerful launch effort that initiates high performance, you don't soon forget it. It shouldn't be so rare; and it doesn't have to be. We've seen it happen, and how it results in far less time, energy, and money spent on repairing and retooling down the road.

It starts with leadership willing to put themselves on the line from the start, and stand for a project that deserves the best launch—and performance —possible.

THE PATHWAY

IDENTIFY UNDISCLOSED PERCEPTIONS, THEN SET COMMITMENTS

Air and challenge prejudices
Pivot to clear commitments

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT FOR STRAIGHT TALK

Establish no-blame culture
Agree to common language

BUILD A ROADMAP SO PEOPLE CAN SEE THE WAY

Set a rythm of high-performance
Integrate the map into your project plan

FOCUS INTENTLY ON INCLUSION, RIGOR & OWNERSHIP

Not a check-the-box exercise
Radically tell the truth

POWERFUL PROJECT LAUNCH

No pausing and rewinding later
On track for high-performance