

Silence - The Root Cause of Project Failure

Research carried out by training company VitalSmarts and professional services firm, The Concoors Group, uncovered five crucial issues – what they term “crucial conversations” – that have an enormous impact on whether high-profile business initiatives ultimately succeed or fail.

The study, "Silence Fails: The Five Crucial Conversations for Flawless Execution", suggests that when even one of these crucial conversations fails, a silent crisis plays out in a relatively simple dynamic that results in initiatives failing 85% of the time. The result of this failure sees projects going over budget, missing deadlines and failing to meet quality and functionality specifications.

However, when these conversations succeed, according to a survey of more than 1,000 executives and project managers across 40 companies found that the failure rate is reduced by 50 to 70%.

Studies have suggested that failing to deliver on critical initiatives is one of the primary reasons that CEOs fail. In other words, CEOs' shortcomings are less about strategy and decision-making than about their ability to execute their plans.

So, what are the five issues that can inflict so much damage?

1. Fact-free planning – the scenario that sees a project is set up to fail from the beginning with deadlines or resource limits that are not grounded in reality.
2. Absent without leave (AWOL) sponsors – managers who fail to provide the leadership, political influence, time or energy to see a project through to completion.
3. Skirting - when people work around the priority-setting process and are not held accountable for doing so.
4. Playing chicken - when team leaders and members don't admit when there are problems with a project but wait for someone else to speak up.
5. Lack of Feedback - team members perpetuate dysfunction when they are unwilling or unable to support the project, and team leaders are reluctant to discuss their failures with them candidly.

In each of these five key problem areas, the study found a clear difference between speaking up and speaking up well. While about half of leaders make some attempt to speak up, most are ineffective. Some speak up but water down their concerns, so the issues are never fully aired. Some speak up but do so in a way that provokes defensiveness from others. Only a handful - about one in eight - are able to share their full concerns and feel their views are understood.

According to the report, the lesson to be drawn from this is simple: "Unless and until leaders take measures to ensure their environment is conducive to holding crucial conversations, a significant number of these issues will remain unaddressed, invisible, and fatal."

The study concludes that the key to breaking the vicious circle of silence is to reward those that do. "Be sure to send a clear and public message that these conversations aren't just important, they're crucial—and those who engage in them are highly valued."