Small Wins

While it might not seem so radical these days to see the words "story" and "business" in the same sentence, that certainly wasn't the case when I set out to put together my first collection of business stories

PROCTER & GAMBLE HIRED ME IN THE EARLY 1990's AS A management consultant. I participated in training programs, procedural reviews, and the like—but I wasn't satisfied with these traditional approaches. I sought to inspire significant change in the way that project practitioners approached their work, and I thought I had found the right vehicle: stories.

Why stories? To put it simply, stories are powerful learning tools because they stimulate curiosity, they provide context to lessons, and they're memorable. Stories are also "unlearning" tools. Logical arguments don't convince people that a change in paradigm is needed; observable action is more convincing. And stories by credible practitioners are as close to observing action as possible.

I wanted to collect the stories of some of the most successful project managers and share them with others in the company. First, I found a sponsor with enough vision to support my idea, and then I assembled a team of eight highly successful project managers who were willing to examine the idea of writing stories about their project work. My long-term goal was to collect their stories in a full-length book.

Transformation efforts take time. After several months, I had no doubt that we could eventually produce a winning product, but I saw that the pace of our progress had slowed, and I worried that enthusiasm for the project was waning as competing development projects vied for attention and dollars.

I proposed we put together a short, preliminary edition of our book and present it to a test audience. The idea seemed to invigorate my team. Soon thereafter, we produced a booklet, a prototype you might call it, and arranged to have it used in one of the company's project management seminars. Suddenly, our project was more than just an idea. With a tangible product in hand, the project plan had become a reality.

Not only was the booklet an overwhelming hit at the class, we received a lot of useful feedback, upper management took note, and the number of new stories being written increased. But we didn't stop there. Recognizing the value of our test product, we produced another interim edition and presented it to an advanced project management workshop. Again, the results were invigorating. We recruited volunteers to write additional stories, and collected more useful feedback.

By the time we published our final product, *In Quest of Project Excellence through Stories*, there was already demand for the book. We had generated interest in our project at the same time that we tested and refined our product. We motivated our team and our stakeholders while we "de-motivated" our detractors. (Who wants to bet against a proven winner?)

It's a lesson I've seen demonstrated time and again. Effective change agents don't string their audience along. They don't spend all their time on processes and plans. They quickly produce interim results, building support for their project as they work towards their goal. Producing "small wins" along the way makes ultimate success more likely. •

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