LMA CONSULTING GROUP Inc.
Transforming People + Process = Profit

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Keys to Success

In the last several years, I've run across many different companies in different industries with different people, different processes and different systems, and yet they all typically have the same challenge - successful project management. And since project management typically cuts across functional departments, the projects typically are critical to the company's sales revenues (such as a product line introduction or marketing implementation), operational costs (cost reduction projects, freight program implementations), cash flow (inventory reduction programs), or the profitability and/or business viability (merger, acquisition, new business opportunity, etc). What could be a more important topic! The three keys to success are as follows:

The first key to success is to define the project and put together the appropriate team. Although this sounds incredibly easy, it is often overlooked in importance. Has anyone been assigned to a project, not understanding the objectives of the project and the amount of time required for the project? Of course! This step will solve those issues. The critical success factor is to define the project so that it can be clearly communicated to the project team and the organization. It doesn't have to require a complex project charter that buries the team in paperwork. Instead, keep it simple - define in understandable terms what the project is about, what it will accomplish, and why the company chose to pursue the project. Make sure that the team fully understands the project and how their participation relates to the success of the project. And, finally, do not forget to communicate to the organization, as this is often an overlooked, yet fatal error - the organization will need to support the project with resources, information, etc.

The second key to success is to take the time to plan. I've found that although most companies have good intentions to plan, it is rarely executed, due to other priorities and crises. Instead, it is key to take a step back and put together a plan. It doesn't have to be complex and time consuming. It doesn't have to utilize the latest project management software and consider complex equations for calculating resource times. Again, keep it simple. A scratch piece of paper is ok, if it is understood and communicated. The most important point is to decide what steps need to be completed, in what order (if order is important), how long the steps will take if x number of resources are dedicated to the task, and which steps are dependent on other steps. You will now be ahead of the majority of companies - you have a plan!

The third key to success is to execute the plan. In my experience, I've found this step to also be often overlooked since it seems simple now that the plan has been developed and the people assigned. Typically there are a few critical steps for success in the execution stage - the critical path, follow-up and communication. Instead of focusing on every step, focus almost exclusively on the critical path (the sequence of steps that must be completed on schedule for the entire project to be completed). This seemingly simple focus works wonders in keeping your project on track. Second, follow up on those critical steps. For example, instead of waiting for the time when a critical step is scheduled to start, begin focusing on the step in advance. Make sure the resources are available, review the plan for those steps, etc. Lastly, remember to constantly communicate progress, roadblocks, etc. With these few simple steps, I've yet to see a project management execution failure.

Projects can range widely in their scope and impact on the organization, so it is achievable to learn on a small project and expand with success. No matter your role in a project, you can begin to implement these keys - and you'll deliver bottom line results!

Lisa's Tips: Quality

Quality has seemingly fallen out of favor in terms of the number of articles and attention in industry circles; however, it remains a bedrock principle for customer service and profitability (and has arisen frequently in the negative aspect re: product quality from China manufacturers, etc), so I thought I'd resurrect the topic and provide a few tips:

1. Focus on the customer - quality should exclusively relate to what the customer sees as quality (and what is valued by the customer in the expectation of pricing). It doesn't matter what Manufacturing or anyone else thinks; the customer's perception matters.

2. Focus on prevention vs detection - There tends to be immense pressure when a quality issue arises, so it is easy to run down the path towards too much detection vs. prevention (as I learned by beginning to run down this path before my Director of Quality stopped me). Instead, take a step back and look at the big picture of how to build prevention into the process instead of making quality a separate element of the process.

3. Metrics - track your key metrics such as customer complaints and parts per million. Reviewing these trends can be enlightening and it will provide important data for decision-making.

4. Cost of quality - put some effort into understanding your cost of quality. It doesn't have to be complex; however, understanding the cost of quality in combination with what customers' value can provide critical information for eliminating waste and meeting/ exceeding customer expectations.

5. Statistical process control - there is value in building appropriate levels of statistical process control into your quality systems. Do not go overboard; however, it is wise to do what will provide you with valuable decision-making data.

Recommended Reading

"***The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More***" by Chris Anderson - this is an interesting book on how the future of business isn't in the high volume hits/ top sellers (the high volume head of a traditional demand curve); instead, it is in the low volume end of what can be the endless long tail of that same curve. This is largely due to the expanding availability of technologies such as the internet and the seemingly limitless choice that it provides to consumers. It's a thought-provoking discussion of this phenomenon and its potential sales and marketing impacts.

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