Why Do Initiatives Go from Sizzle to Fizzle?

Description

Spending lots of time with communities and organizations has provided great learnings. Again and again, I see successes take place that are transferable to others. I am also fortunate to have the opportunity to share with leaders the wisdom of experts in specific areas that can be helpful to them. With this column, Iâ??d like to share a method for change management that works in nearly every setting, from big organizations to small businesses to communities.

When I facilitate workshops, a topic that often comes up is how to get people on board with a project or change initiative. I typically ask the group to think about projects theyâ??ve been involved in that, despite having had early promise, quickly ended up fading. I call this *sizzle to fizzle*.

If you are older than 30, you likely can recall hearing an enthusiastic announcement that a problem was going to be solved or, at minimum, improved. There may have been a catchy slogan and some neat graphics, and items like banners, mugs, and T-shirts may have been distributed. Yet after the initial optimism, the process slowed down, other things popped up to divert attentionâ?¦and soon the initiative went to the graveyard of programs and projects that did not work, did not last, or did not achieve the intended results.

This may not have happened because of a lack of enthusiasm, or because the project was not worthy. It is just that planning is easier than actual implementation. Often the right steps arenâ??t taken up front.

When a business leader, community organization, community group, or government body makes an announcement about a change initiative or new project, there are usually people who are excited and confident. This is especially true of those in the lead. However, there is an even larger group (some silent and some not so quiet) who roll their eyes and think (or maybe say), *Here we go again. Give me the free shirt, or the town hall session, or the book to read, or the consultant to listen to and call me when this runs its course like the many other programs have.* Often people are reluctant to get on board due to being let down in the past.

The initiative may be connected to an extremely worthy goal. In business, it may be around the topic of great customer service. For community groups, it may be around solving an issue such as poverty. In government, it may be something like how to deal with panhandling. Yet in my travels, Iâ??ve observed that both successes and failures can happen despite how worthy the goal is. This is not unusual. Research shows change is hard, as is sustaining the gains.

In my workshops, I have the group split up for table activities. They are asked to think of a successful project. Then they discuss and document what steps were taken to make the project work. The next assignment is to think of a project that did not workâ??or at minimum did not achieve what was hoped forâ??and document the steps taken for it as well. Having done this often, Iâ??ve found there are some similarities in both activities.

For those that worked, here are the top five steps I always hear:

1. The project is introduced by a trusted group or individual and described in a manner that captures hearts and minds.

2. The introducers take time to build a coalition of people to test the idea, get feedback, and adjust, if need be, prior to a large announcement.

3. The project is then introduced to a large group, meaning a whole company and/or community. During this time, the guiding coalition is in place. Outside expertise is brought in to share examples and lessons learned, and to answer questions and seek input.

4. A wide range of input is sought to further vet the project. This may include surveys, focus groups, charettes, and so forth. In all cases, the outcome is clearly identified, so people can see what can be accomplished.

5. A funding mechanism is outlined that includes the return on investment.

When successful projects are noted, the steps to success are almost always in line with the five steps above.

Also, when the projects that did not work are shared, it becomes evident that one or more of the five steps were either missed or were not done well. Here are some usual misses:

1. The burning platformâ??that item that captures the heart and mindâ??is not laid out.

2. Not enough time is spent building that guiding coalition.

3. To save money, quality outside expertise is not utilized.

4. The math is not done to demonstrate how the project will be paid for and what the return will be. (The return is usually more than dollars.)

5. When you skip the foundational steps outlined in 1-4, pushback occurs, and the project loses steam and often fails.

My recommendation is to always take the time to do the exercises outlined in this column. These are proven steps that when followed almost always lead to success. Publish these best practices and use them as guidelines for every project.

I call these steps â??success plates,â?• because theyâ??re similar to the concept of a template. They are a standardized method for keeping the sizzle going and achieving success. When we know what works, we owe it to ourselves, our companies, and our communities to do it. Great ideas and worthy projects deserve to succeed. And employees, customers, and citizens deserve to enjoy the rewards of the positive change that follows.

Date Created
March 9, 2020
Author
quint-studer