Managing Sensitive Projects a Lateral Approach, by Oliver D'Herbemont & Bruno Cesar

A Book Review by Ian Jay

Projects, like the Newbury By-pass in the UK, or the Channel Tunnel Rail link in France, are not places where strategies to deal with ‘soft’ issues appear to be needed. Yet these are two examples, the authors of this book provide, that illustrate ways of dealing with problems that are a threat to such projects. In fact they convincingly show the need to apply such thinking to the strategy of all but the simplest projects.

The problem many projects face is the need to manage factors that are outside the control of the project management team. In the case of a large construction project this may relate to public opposition to the scheme. In smaller projects the problem may relate to the feelings of staff about their status being affected by a change.

The authors explain that projects can be challenged by Technical or Human factors. It is the Human factor that creates the need for a Lateral approach. Typically organisation change projects need a Lateral approach, but so do some technical projects. For example nuclear waste disposal, due to the strong emotions this subject can arouse. The book provides a process to devise strategies that deal with emotional opposition to the project.

The initial step is to segment the field of play. The text goes on to explain how to measure the synergy between players and the project. From this eight groups of stakeholders can be identified, each to be dealt with using a different strategy.

There is a chapter in the book devoted to the incorrect handling of opposition to projects. And this is followed by a chapter describing strategies that do not work. A common failure is to spend time addressing opponents’ needs whilst neglecting allies. This behaviour leads to a loss of support from allies and increases the strength of the opposition.

The key to the lateral project is to identify allies and energise them so that others follow. Tactics to do this include pilot projects demonstrating new ways of working, or separate projects that lead to the main goal. For instance, a separate project to renew a town centre around the rail station, gave the Channel Tunnel a positive meaning to the local population. They then supported the Tunnel project.

An important aspect of the project strategy is “taking the irrational into account”. This is the title of a chapter that deals with transactional analysis. The authors explain how to use it to diagnose and solve a problem. The goal is to find a way to show players that the project is aligned with values that they already hold. The process is illustrated with an example of the introduction of word processing in a French Insurance company.

The text concludes with a series of short chapters providing advice and strategies to deal with opposition. The point is made that it is a common to mistake a potential ally for an opponent. There is some discussion of the sociological changes that take place over the life of the project. These include a ‘nirvana’ phase at the start when all appears to be going well followed by ‘disillusion’ as snags appear. The project can then move into the ‘daggers drawn’ phase and here the authors advise that tensions have to be lowered. This lowering of tension is critical to project success at this point and the key is for the project manager to achieve this and identify the synergies that can be gained working with the hostile players.

The authors are practicing project consultants with extensive experience of dealing with problematic projects. The book contains clear diagrams to assist in understanding what the authors are saying and it provides a roadmap to deal with soft issues. It would be of value to anyone involved in a project.
that represents significant change for some stakeholders. It is applicable to small as well as large scale projects.


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