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The Project Management Best Practices Report

Product/Project Insights

Someone Else's Trap

"Great ideas" often entrap the unwary consumer of business-press hype

by Dennis Smith | Are you skeptical of what you read in newspapers and see on TV news? To me, much of the news is more about entertainment and the politics of the editors than about the delivery of unbiased facts. I'm concerned that books and magazines that cover business are moving in the same direction. Have you noticed how difficult it is in new-generation business magazines to tell the feature stories from the ads? Do you believe what you read about showcase projects, turnarounds, quality methods, strategic deployment and other wonder stories?

NOTE

This month's column is the 14th and last in a series on the "traps" that businesses encounter as they stand up to common challenges. These traps, which are commonly faced by companies at certain stages of their maturity, can be costly, both in cash and in management attention, but many can be avoided if a business takes the time to learn from the experience of others. For other columns in the series, see previous issues of *People On Projects* or visit www.companysmith.com. And watch the Center for Business Practices online bookstore at www.cbponline.com for a forthcoming book based on Dennis' Traps series. - Ed.

Setting the Trap

Brad Blanton writes in his book *Radical Honesty*, "What is normal is to be concerned with having a good cover story. Normal people are concerned with figuring out the right thing to say that puts them in the best light. They want to live up to their own best guess about what the people they are talking to want to hear." If that's true, then when we read the business press, we need to look deeper.

Why should we believe the stories we read in the business press? I've been in organizations that won awards and received glowing reviews. I've talked with people who have been a part of the organizations where executives have bestsellers, and it isn't always what it seems. It's cast in "the best light."

There are many balanced cases presented. True project histories. However, the charming and seductive nature of the Big Win is not always what it seems, especially to a team that lived through it. Moreover, taking on someone else's business solution without intensive investigation and preparation holds great potential for disaster.

Stepping into the Trap

So you've read a Big Book about a great idea and are awed by the potential that

it presents to your organization. The first check is to be sure that snazzy PowerPoint presentation or the fame of the writer has not triumphed over substance. Particularly in these days of razzle dazzle hypermedia, it seems that more may be spent on presentation than on content. I'm particularly wary of books that seem over-produced. While there are many great ideas in Tom Peters' book *Re-imagine!*, the music video nature of its production obscures some of its greatest messages, and over-promotes some that are less important.

The next problem is incomplete understanding. The glossy reviews often skip details about the false starts and dead ends, the failed attempts at similar projects, the power struggles, the gruntwork, and yes, the luck ... all combining to create the win.

This can cause you to commit to a project without sufficient resources or perhaps with an incomplete understanding of what it takes to finish. In reading postmortems of failed CRM projects, it seems that many are started without an understanding of what it would cost to



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finish—what it would cost to clean up and load all of the valuable customer data that is required to make the project useful.

And of course the one thing that traps many teams is insufficient sign-up from the users, sponsors and the higher ranks of the organization. Quite common with Big-Book ideas is too much sponsorship at the executive level and not enough support from the people who have to do the work. And as I have written so often, without the buy-in from the team and the tenacious commitment of a project champion who will undyingly drive the project, the odds of success drop precipitously.

Life in the Trap

Implementing someone else's idea can cause so many problems when you're inside the project, and being overcommitted is not the least of it. I've seen few great successes where the total cost of success was understood up front. Even if the IT or product development team is bang on, the cost of user training, data cleanup, promotion, facilities, and other non-engineer costs are often underestimated.

If the team is following someone else's process, they often accepted that process with more faith and less scrutiny than an internal proposal. Their not fully understanding the process due to their "lighter look" at it can mean that the team isn't prepared for what happens when they

encounter obstacles. Or perhaps they are not prepared for the side effects of staying on the Big Book path. All too often programs initiated by "Corporate" can drive you right into this trap.

Those diversions are caused by ideas that are conceptually great but not practical in the context of your business. They are impractical due to differences between your culture and that of the originator, building toward results not suited to your leadership style, or a mismatch to the collaborative style of your organization. Team performance causes more programs to fail than bad ideas. And many ideas presented in the press are only successful due to the charisma, tenacity or ruthlessness of the people who led the original case. Can you match their style?

Avoiding the Trap

The first trap avoidance strategy is to recognize that your implementation of someone else's Big-Book idea is a project. You need scrutiny during justification, a project plan, short- and long-term milestones, sign up for the total costs, dedicated resources, and the long-term personal accountability of a committed project champion, a project manager and a project leader. All are required.

You should only undertake a project when you know you can finish it or reasonably believe that a smart failure—results short of total success—may still be your next-best move.

The Last Trap

When all the milestones are marked, all the flags have been waived, the winners won, and the losers lost, it's your project. You need to make the judgments, garner the understanding, make the commitments and show the fortitude required to pull it off. Short of that total commitment, it's unlikely you'll win. With that commitment, you can reach your goal.

THIS IS THE LAST COLUMN in the "Traps" series. Over the past 14 months I've had a great time writing them and I hope you've found them useful and occasionally entertaining. Two or three of them rank as my favorite things that I've written, and a couple fell short. But now at the end of this series it's up to you. Step in a trap ... or don't. ■

Dennis Smith's unique background includes 30 years of experience with software, electrical, and mechanical engineering projects. As principal of CompanySmith, Inc., he enables businesses to shorten time-to-market, reduce costs, and become product development leaders. Smith holds a B.S. in mechanical engineering from Purdue University and is a member of PDMA and PMI. Contact Dennis at dms@companysmith.com or visit his website at www.companysmith.com to subscribe to his free newsletter.