

Recovery Strategies: Key to Successful Projects

By Mark Samuel

As the leader of IMPAQ, I am familiar with the feeling of angst in the pit of my stomach when I discover a mistake in our program materials, or a potential client doesn't receive a proposal that I had prepared. Of course, I want everything to be perfect - no mistakes, no problems, no mishaps and most importantly, no surprises!

Understanding that mistakes are bound to occur as part of human nature, my next concern is that our team doesn't become paralyzed by those mistakes. Have you ever seen a person or team stop their progress on a project, because of meeting an unsuspecting snag or problem? Or, have you seen one mistake turn into a series of mistakes? The trap comes when the person or team begins analyzing its process, forgetting where they are headed in terms of achieving their desired outcome. People will argue over the right and wrong ways of leading the meetings, and in the meantime, no action has been taken to achieve the goal. As leaders, our role is to keep people moving and making progress according to our desired outcome.

This means we must have the desired outcome clearly articulated and regularly repeated so that people stay focused on where they are going rather than where they have been. It is hard to drive a car constantly looking into the rear view mirror.

Based on the desired outcomes, milestones along with target dates should be developed indicating that progress is being made according to tangible descriptions. In addition, a tracking system and review process needs to be in place to assure that progress is being made according to schedule. Too often, the people involved in a project lose sight that they are off track in accomplishing their milestones, thus setting themselves up for a major crisis due to the delays.

More importantly, recovery systems should be in place as we move towards our desired outcomes. While we can't predict all the problems that may occur in a project, we can anticipate the kinds of problems that can occur and establish our contingencies for dealing with those unexpected problems. Maybe this is as simple as, communicating to the entire team when a problem shows up in one aspect of the project in order to brainstorm solutions. Of course, a recovery plan may be to notify upper management when a major issue is surfaced along with alternative recommendations.

The most important parts of a recovery system are:

1. People feel the safety to surface problems as they occur, rather than waiting until they become a crisis in hopes that they could fix the problem before anyone found out.
2. The recovery plan clearly describes a game plan for dealing with unexpected events including each person's role and responsibilities,

3. All those who are affected by the problems be included in the communication, so that others can make their necessary adjustments. (Otherwise, one problem may trigger a series of problems.)
4. Once the recovery has been completed, a review of the impact on the desired outcomes be reviewed, and the game plan modified accordingly.
5. Acknowledging the success of the recovery so that you reinforce the safety of surfacing mistakes, planning with contingencies, and making progress rather than worrying about perfection.

Several months ago, we were contracted by an information systems department was plagued by missed deadlines for important projects, dissatisfied customers whose needs weren't being met, and overrun costs based on poor utilization of resources. The members of that department blamed one another for the problems including management blaming employees and vice versa. After clarifying the department's vision of excellence and success factors to support that vision, we guided the department in developing various recovery systems. Some related to their projects, while others related to their relationships. Their recovery plans involved their communication with customers when problems showed up, problem solving sessions amongst themselves when deadlines were being missed and agreements for resolving differences and conflicts when there was an impasse.

Six months later, the department received three accommodations from their customers for outstanding service. They reduced their departmental costs and implemented a new platform smoothly without losing even a single day of service, and morale increased by focusing people on their outcome and recovery process leaving no time for blaming. While planning for perfection is the popular way of preventing mistakes, developing recovery systems has had a greater impact for improving performance, customer satisfaction and morale.