

Stay Calm and Keep Leading

Approaches to retain team cohesion and morale

 By Renee Gendron

When all heads turned to Heather to see how best to proceed, there was a profound silence in the room. The project had not been going well. It seemed that every problem they could come across, they encountered. Key suppliers could not deliver products with certain specifications. Partner organisations did not deliver on their end of the deal causing significant delays and cost overruns. Many dedicated staff tried from all involved organisations championed the importance of the project to their respective teams and managers. Much of it fell on deaf ears. The business analysts stressed the profitability of the undertaking was now in jeopardy. Morale had been depleted by falling short of several key milestones and seemingly endless overtime with little progress. And now the team looked at Heather, for a key decision to be made: To inform the client that the project will cost a lot more than quoted and will be delivered at a far later date, if at all, or to inform the client that work will cease.

Much of the literature around leadership is focused around motivating one's self and teams to work for a common goal. It is in fact a key component of a competent leader: To engage and encourage those around them to actualize a vision. The ability to do this is crucial to the success of teams and organizations.

What is often neglected in the literature is when to assess a situation and end an undertaking because it is not achieving the desired results. When efforts do not yield results it drains resources, time, and most importantly morale. At this point, leaders need to be really attuned to their inner dialogue and the messages – both overtly and more subtly – from their team. A leader needs to do an honest assessment of where they are in relation to their goal and decide if they continue on this track, change strategy and mix up the resources, or end the initiative.

I have been conducting a study on leadership for the past year. When I asked Arlene Worstman, former Executive Director of Canadian Federation of Nurses Union, her impressions of when to stop an undertaking, Arlene said 'If you've worked yourself into isolation, without any champion or support, it's not working so well. You have to do an honest assessment and ask yourself is it really worth it?'

Andrew Leslie Lt-General (retired – Canadian Army) noted the following on the matter "It's a 30-40% external reality check. When your team is not working, we're wasting energy needed to make a decision. Leadership is experimental. You have to listen to your team and yourself. When your energy is depleted to almost zero and when overall efforts hurt the team, you have to pause and reconsider."

Marilyn Tam, best-selling author of the Happiness Choice, speaker and business leader (Nike, Rebook and Aveda), also shared her insights. "When you feel like you've exhausted all other avenues, you've consulted others, and tried their advice – that's when you stop. Listen to your intuition. Whatever I'm pushing isn't achieving results. Is the premise wrong? Be open to input at all times. Be constantly learning. Don't say that you'll 'die trying' – be aware of what you're doing."

When faced with the reality of having to end an initiative because

it is not delivering on expected outcomes and impacts, consider using the following approaches to maintain team cohesion and morale:

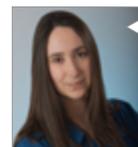
Warning signs evaluation: In hindsight we can identify hints, warnings and clues that we could have picked up on to correct an error or problem much more quickly. Take some time to reflect on this hints and think about what you and your team members can do to change things next time. What would cause you to act more quickly, in a different manner or engage other sources of support the next time you are presented with this information? This is not an exercise in reliving "What – ifs?" This is an effort to make you more self-aware of your environment and what it is telling you. When you detect these clues at an earlier stage you are becoming more pro-active and engage. Be careful to not live in the past but to learn from it.

A learning assessment: Gather the team and determine what was learned. Bringing a project to a close is an excellent opportunity to discuss process, supply issues, technological hurdles, timing (Were outside sources of support engaged too late or not often enough?) and other significant issues.

Ecosystem evaluation: Which tools were used and which other tools are available but not used, which suppliers were engaged and what other suppliers are available, which relationships were productive and which were not (both for the team and between organisations), who were your champions and who else could be called upon for a similar role in a different endeavor?

Communication style evaluation: Examine how your team communicated between themselves and the quality of communication between other project partners. What insights can be gained here? Was there only one style of communication (say face to face) when the team(s) would have benefited from multiple types of communication (monthly face to face, a social media group or page for the project, telephone and informal social activities?). Everyone has a communication preference. Each team also has its own communication style. What communication bridges between individuals and teams can be built?

Dealing with the stigma of failure: Everyone experiences failure in some capacity – being on the losing side of a sporting event, not winning a bid, not getting the promotion or getting hired, among many other experiences. Continue to develop your leadership skills by being empathetic to the sentiments expressed by your team. It's natural to feel down after losing. Don't force them to pep up right after the news. Help them talk openly about what happened and what they learned – always focus on the learning opportunity afforded by failure. And keep them oriented in the present and future by creating another vision to which they can apply themselves. **LE**



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