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Feature Article

The Stripes, Spots, and Yellow Streaks of School District Stakeholders

Project managers like to tout their skill in building buy-in among the stakeholders of a project.

Stakeholders are those people who have a stake in the project's success. These people could be anyone who touches (or is impacted by) the project in any way.

Scenario #1:

When the Scenario #1 process is working in a flawed manner, for example, a director decides to implement a new math program, district-wide. A salesperson visited, provided slick brochures, a CD, maybe even a luncheon and a high-pitched sales presentation.

Anyway, the director is "sold" and decides to use "left-over" federal funds to purchase the program. Then, at the start of the next school year, teachers receive training in how to add this supplemental and expensive set of materials to their math classes.

Of course, this is backwards from how this should work, and the implementation of the materials meets with resistance...some subtle, some not so subtle. After a year, no one is using the materials, and the director begins to sweat, a cold sweat fueled by fear. Someone might find out that the project was a complete flop.

Scenario #2:

This time, a new salesperson with another set of materials visits with teachers (maybe a committee) to build buy-in.

Teachers are promised better student scores, access to add-on technology (CDs), and high student interest. Every question that teachers ask is met with a slick redirect, and the sales person, they call him or her the "Closer" overcomes every question that teachers have.

Results: This initiative begins to march in step to the roll out of Scenario #1, and the results are about the same.

After a year, the salesperson visits the district, driving in a new luxury European sedan, and selling a new product.

Scenario #3:

The superintendent puts out the word that directors and principals should look favorably on the products of one particular company. But, the superintendent is very busy, and absent mindedly omits the fact that the salesperson from that company is a brother-in-law.

Wanting to "score points" with the superintendent, principals and directors trip over each other in their scramble to be the first to impress the superintendent with the quantity of their knowledge as measured through the size of their order.

When minimal, even negative results, result; no culpable individual wants to bring accountability measures to the table; and the de facto conspiracy of silence is the traditional group response.

Scenario #4: (Note: This scenario is so pervasive that it is often thought of as standard operating procedure.)

Budgets are devised from a fixed-pot mentality. Folks scramble to spend the money that they were assigned to use last year, making rush-to-spend misjudgments, and avoiding contact with knowledgeable front-line workers (such as teachers) while making purchasing decisions.

Common wisdom dictates that unspent budget money will be taken back the next year, and money cannot be "rolled over." This means that budget managers cannot save up for complex, multi-year projects, and that projects generally must conform to fiscal year time frames. A corollary to this is that most budgets, most projects and many grants are under funded in educational bureaucracies.

Here is what actually affects a project (each allowance should be budgeted):

Estimated cost

Allowance for price increases from the time of proposal until the time of project approval

Allowance for items missed in the original estimation

Allowance for things going wrong

Allowance for additional benefits to be added as they show up to make the project stronger

What is actually budgeted?:

Arbitrary amount of estimated cost, say 80%

Let's say that you pad the project proposal's budget so that you can account for some of the allowances, say 10%.

Then, when the decision-makers cut the project budget by 20% you end up with a project that is 12% short of funds.

Here is the math:

Original project cost:

Actual Amount = 100%

Budget Request = \$100

Padding for allowances:
Padding Multiplier = 10%
Padded Budget Request = \$110

Arbitrary Funding Approval
Project Arbitrary Funding = 80%
Actual Funding Amount = \$88

Actual Shortfall
Actual Shortfall = 12%
Underfunded Amount = \$12

What is pervasive is that legitimate education (and bureaucratic) projects tend to be under funded and under resourced.
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Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00