

Transcription - Stopping or Rethinking a Project

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. I still have a bit of a rough speaking voice, but we will continue on. Today we want to talk about and revisit a topic, that we have covered in the past, but we've got some other thoughts we want to share with you on it today. Rethinking a project, reviewing a project, and making a decision to stop progress from a project or stop it altogether.

What we want to look at today is, do you have the responsibility to make those decisions? What do you base those decisions on? How do you communicate those decisions? And how much rethinking goes into revitalising a project? Where is the return on the investment, in terms of the project, in terms of the team?

Too many times we have a project that, at the time of that project being approved, we went through all the right processes, we had a reason for starting the project, we had a clear expected outcome, we have a budget, we commit the resources. Most of the times, that ends up with the right results and at the end of the project, but sometimes things happen during the projects, we are forcing things, either change at the big picture level or change to priorities, budgets, resources, whatever.

I think the first step is, never to be afraid to stop and think, is this still relevant in view of the change? So firstly, what changed? Does that change impact the project? If so, how? Does it mean we've got to do it faster? Does it mean we've got to do it differently? There are people to make that decision. They are the people who initiated the project, the project team and whoever decided the major change. What is that major change?

The other thing is, sometimes it's not really about stopping the project altogether, as Kim said, it's can we rethink it? Is it something we could do differently or concentrate on different aspects of it? Or would the timeline not change? Everything else stays the same, but now we can push it out or as I said earlier, bring it forward because it's to fit in with a new direction and bigger picture. I'll break it up into smaller projects, break it up into more manageable chunks, send it out to different areas, resource it differently. A whole range of things you could look at, in terms of rethinking a project. But I think the bottom line has to be that if this change is because you've been monitoring the projects along the way and it's not meeting the targets that you've set along the way, and you get a sense that it's not ever going to meet the targets that you've set despite the resources that you might put into it, despite the rethinking that you might do and the creativity that you might bring to the project in terms of trying to get to its goals, is it time for you to rethink the goal of the project and to discuss that or is it time to rethink the project as a whole and say that it's not ever going to work.

I think that's a very difficult decision to make because it's very difficult to differentiate between, we were told that we had to meet these targets, we're not going to meet them. So do we continue on and not meet them but get close and is close enough good enough? Or do we just say no, we're not going to meet them. We're not going to put any more resources to this task. We'll stop right now. And that's the hard balance to look at and to try and determine where your responsibility lies, where the organizational need resides, and how do you address that and how do you address it in terms of communicating your

feeling as a team leader to the rest of the team who might think that they can, if not get to the target, at least get close enough. Pretty good should be good enough, because of all the resources that have gone into it. They couldn't have done any better if they tried. Were the targets set too high or set in the wrong places originally? What should have happened, at this point, rather than stop the project, is rethink the targets.

Are you in a position to be able to do that? It would be at that very point, what Kim said earlier, you can stage it. You could say, yes we didn't get to do all of it, but we're close enough and good enough for it to be functional and get the payback. So we'll call it stage one and we will communicate absolutely not just to within the team, but to all the users that are going to use it and the stakeholders to explain that, look for now, we think this is enough to get the payback because there are other things happening, like another system is being introduced or priorities or redirecting resources, whatever that may be. Stage two can, in fact, wait till next financial year or quarter, the next quarter or whatever, to be workable. The most important thing is to get the right input in that decision making from within and from the stakeholders and from the user end as well.

A couple of important things for me, at that point, when you rethink a project and you determine that you're going to break it up and put it into stages or you're going to continue with the project and not meet the original target but maybe a target that you have re-established, is that you don't communicate excuses. There are no excuses that need to be communicated, you have simply reviewed the project and that this is the target now. No other qualifiers and definitely no other excuses. I'm very much into the no excuses. You know, we take responsibility. We make the decisions. This is what we do. And the second thing is, that if you do rethink those targets and you reset those targets, that they are celebrated. The fact that you have been responsible enough to look at the progress of the project and determine that it's going to meet this stage and not the original target that was set when you didn't know what that was going to really be involved in the process. So you've done the responsible thing and looked at it all the way through and said no, that's not achievable. These things are achievable and you still are right and it's positive and it's reinforced and it goes out to everyone, regardless of how their involvement is affected by the project or the change in the project, that you celebrate those new targets that you're going to reach.

If, for some unforeseen reason, you decide the project has to be stopped and I shelved altogether, never underestimate the feeling of the project team that worked so hard and most times when people are working on projects they're doing a lot of extra work in addition to their business and usual jobs. They would feel pretty devastated and let down, even though they might know. Take that into account, in both communication and the reason, honest reasons, no excuses, of why the project has stopped and it's no reflection on them. It's not that they did anything wrong, it's an organization decision. Why it's important for everybody else who is not involved in the project is because you will have other projects. Some people are going to be thinking, I don't want to go and work all these hours and put in extra and see no results for my hard work and end up canning it, I was sure we're going to carry it on this time. That confidence in knowing why you embark on a project and that you're going to commit to the end, it's got to be good leadership, when you realize you can't throw good money after bad. When there's a mistake or there's a change beyond your control, you have to call it and you have to call that, sorry but we have to can this project.

I think if you're truly managing a project, you start out with targets, with goals, in mind. Yes, so you start a project and you have these targets that you're going to meet, that you've set for the project, but obviously you're going to have reviews all the way along the way and I think it is your responsibility to the team and the team's responsibility to the project, to be honest at those reviews and to not say yeah yeah we're on track or on target, we're doing this, we're doing that, but to identify right from the start, where the short term targets are not met or meeting a different way to the way you expected them, so that everyone is aware of what is happening. You will find that when a project does get derailed, for whatever reason, that the team pretty well knows that that's the case and all they want is reassurance that they have a good opportunity to do that. They have all done everything that they could to meet the original targets that were set and that they are all being equally responsible for getting it as far as it has got.

Any project management involves regular updates, frequency of updates. It is something you agree upfront and to whom and the format in which it's communicated. This is really really important because a lot of people think, well I'm doing the work, I haven't got time to update. It's really important because everyone is across what you're doing in the project and where you're at and it gives them the opportunity to maybe help, by giving you information or material or doing the testing for you, as well as knowing if, for whatever reason, that it needs to be changed or stopped, then they already know why. They travel the journey with you, updates are very very important so all parties who are directly or not at all involved, are across the project. If it's a major project, then it's warranted. It's about those reporting points being relevant, so that it's not just about, here's the checklist, tick everything off that has been finished, or that you're working on, or that is at a stage where you need to tell us. It's not a report that says, well we've done the last 30 days, we've filled out this many forms, we've done this many inductions, or whatever the parameters are, it's not a statistical reflection. It is more a progression reflection that you're looking at. All of this this body of things needed to be done to get us to a point where we can do the next body of things, are we at that point? Do we need to rethink it? Do we need to brainstorm how we're going to approach the next bit because we really don't think that the results we're getting now are going to help us do the next bit? It is not just about reporting backwards but it's about projecting forwards and looking at whether you're going to get to that point with the activity that you've got now. It's a bit like when you're driving and you look at the fuel gauge and you say, oh I've got another 600 kilometers to go. Is there enough fuel in this tank to get me where I'm going or will I need to stop? It is no different in a project.

We shouldn't just report on what we've done, but we should be reporting on what we've done on the basis of how that is going to help us with the next things that we have to do, because that's where you will start to identify when it might be issues of resourcing or process or practicalities, that you can rethink and that you can re-jig and you can call in extra resources or you can outsource or you can do it some other way that will help you pass what might seem to be roadblocks or whatever.

When you're talking to your project team, don't forget how important it is to talk to those on the team that are external to your organisation. They could be consultants, contractors etc. It's very important that they realise, more than realise, understand intimately why the project is taking a different direction. If it is, whether it's accelerated or whether it's extended or whether it's stopped. That is because your company's reputations are very important. You're

going to need those resources to work on other projects in the future and they don't want to feel that this company is unreliable, they start, they don't finish, I don't want to work for them, I'll just go work for another company. It's important because otherwise you'll end up with second best if you don't treat the externals as well as you treat your internal people.

I think we probably covered that sufficiently for you today. Thanks for being with us again. If you've got any thoughts on how you have dealt with the re-thinking of projects or the re-resourcing or the stopping of projects, please drop us a line but for today, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.