

David and Goliath meet inspiration and focus with enormous purpose

by Laura Stone

In a world where we individually feel as though we don't have much control, how do you help your company, department or team focus on what they can control? This month, I'd like to share the story of how a very small team is making a huge difference in a world they don't have much control over, to help you have the belief, inspiration and a few simple tools that will allow you to make the important stuff happen in your world.

We recently had the honor and privilege to serve our country on a six-month assignment. We were not on the front lines in Afghanistan, but worked with a small division of a U.S. government agency doing its part in helping to protect our country in case of a bio-terrorism attack. The leader of this division was struggling to figure out how to help his team perform at a higher level, improve processes that they could control (this is central), and ultimately help raise morale on a team where many felt powerless.

Part of the team's greatest struggle was managing how to perform their duties while navigating a political arena that many team members were never trained for: educating Congress about their work. Adding further complexity, the team's success also

depends on being able to work in partnership with an alphabet soup of other government agencies.

What originally started as an inquiry about a half-day conflict management session for a two-day offsite meeting turned into a six-month transformation project that addressed a root issue for the entire department. As in private-sector startups, this department was moving so quickly, with demands seemingly changing by the minute, that it was very difficult for the team to step back and help themselves to work more effectively.

These days it is very difficult for many teams to align on the most essential work since, on the surface, all projects can be justified. Employees today are generally far more sophisticated and smarter about reading the tea leaves in their organizations about what work is most important. However, these same employees can't see all parts of an organization and the portfolio of current projects underway. How many organizations today have a central project management office (PMO) managing all aspects of a division? For smaller divisions, this would be nirvana. Even if they did have a PMO, these projects must be vetted with leadership and, more



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importantly, align with the corporate strategy.

The team we were working with had this in its favor: they had a very clear mission and were charged with articulating their concerns and developing a way to work more effectively with leadership to achieve specific goals. As part of the transformation process, the team wrote a “pride statement” (describing what specifically would make them proud to accomplish together). Focusing on what they could control within their ability and scope of work, they decided, “We have the ability to make change.”

They identified problems and developed plans to address them, and identified four initiatives that would yield the highest impact within their scope of work as well as improve efficiency and their internal work environment. These initiatives focused on streamlining certain internal processes, using integrated project teams more effectively, incorporating business plans into agency announcements, and improving operational communications. They created their four initiatives with 90-day deadlines, some of which could be completed sooner than that, while others would result in the team aligning internally in order to make recommendations to other agencies.

Taking time to step back and evaluate the current environment is vital to the success of any team. Without this time for evaluation, even the most productive teams can veer off track. Equally important is having the right tools at hand – here are three tools that this team used effectively.

Tool #1: To be most effective, choose the fewest, most essential initiatives that can 1) be accomplished in 90 days, and 2) align beautifully to your longer-term objectives. We have seen this work incredibly well. Even though it may sound simple, it takes great discipline. Think about having a staging area for building a house – you can’t just build it overnight. Land must be cleared, a hole dug, a foundation created. The echoes of everyday “we are crazy busy” thinking makes us think we can build a house overnight or learn Spanish in two days. But can we really? The idea of this tool is to make choices that help you set up for the next 90 days and then the next 90 days after that. These periods are separated by times of progress assessment (did we do what we said we were going to do?), appropriate celebration, and then assessment of what is the right work for the next 90 days.

Tool #2: Clear accountability and ownership held by the individual help drive the team to make the work

happen by “date certain.” This was a new term for this team until a year ago, when it was used by a leader who has seen what can be possible when people’s feet are held to the fire and they are not allowed to move the end point. Remember the movie “Apollo 13” with Tom Hanks, and the scene where the team at Ground Control had a very clear set of materials to work with and a finite amount of time to execute to save the astronauts from death? It’s amazing what is possible when we have a deadline that doesn’t move.

Tool #3: Clear the path for lane drivers (accountable individuals) to be successful, essentially setting up leadership to own fully the success of their people, so they ensure their people have what they need to be successful. When we worked with this team, we had monthly planning sessions where we asked questions that got at the heart of progress, risks and next steps. These candid conversations helped the team keep the necessary focus and ensured their progress.

In a world where fast-paced change is the norm, you and your team can’t control everything that happens. However, with a sharp focus on key initiatives and the appropriate tools, you can position yourselves to successfully make things happen in a way that makes a difference.



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