Career Path: How to Implement a Project with Lackluster Management Support

Career Development

I have read a lot of advice over my career. There is a steady stream of new and existing rules that companies are expected to comply with, or face the sometimes terrible consequences. Data privacy and data protection regulations are a good recent example (GDPR, I'm talking about you!).

This environment creates uncertainty and fear, which in turn creates business opportunities for a lot of people. Consultants and law firms and "subject matter experts" of all kinds emerge to offer their services in helping you understand new rules and implement projects to ensure you stay compliant. Compliance, in other words, is big business.

As a result, I am used to hearing people pitch how to implement the latest requirement, best practice, or trending idea. And there is one element to many pitches that demonstrates well that supposed experts don't work in the same world as you and me. I refer, of course, to the dreaded requirement to ensure you have "top management support."

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I get it. Of course it would be easier to push through your latest project if you had the unanimous backing of the board of directors, the CEO, and the executive committee. Looking back over the years, how many times has your project honestly warranted, let alone actually received, that kind of support?

I can think of a few instances where the stars were so aligned. Usually yours is one of hundreds of projects, all important in their own right. Why should yours be singled out as one of the *most important*?

Telling a hapless manager that ensuring top management support is a critical success factor for their

project is more than unhelpful. It's a bit like saying, "OK, first ensure an unlimited source of reliable, cheap, clean, renewable energy..."

I want to know *how to implement a project without the CEO being a cheerleader*. I want a consultant who can tell me how to get attention among hundreds of competing projects and priorities.

As a civic service for everyone who has been there, here is a checklist for *how to implement a project with lackluster management support*.

1. Gain some perspective about your project

Accept that your project is one of many, and get a realistic sense of your project's relative importance — not to you, but to your company. This requires you to understand what other important initiatives your company is working on, and why.

2. Stay humble about your role

Remember that gaining this perspective is not about you, and not about your CEO or management team. You are hard-working and rightly focused on your area of responsibility. Your CEO is almost certainly hard-working as well and dealing with a tremendous complexity of topics.

Virtually every proposal the CEO evaluates come with an assertive manager saying "This is the most important project. We have to drop everything and do it now!" All your CEO learns from such a pitch is that the manager doesn't have a good sense of the broader picture.

3. Know what's hot at your company

Identify the initiatives that currently *do have* top management support. Who is championing them, who is working on them, what is the timeline, what are some upcoming deliverables, etc.? Become knowledgeable about what strategic imperatives your company is working on and why.

4. Find a link between your project and that hot ticket

Evaluate whether there are any areas of overlap between a current strategic priority and your new project. Your link may be direct, it may be tenuous. There is always a link. It’s your job to find that link.

5. Identify a partner in arms

Once you've found one or more links, find out who is currently working on the strategic priority that may be affected by your link. This person could be at any level in the organization, and is typically not among the senior-most managers involved. Your target is more likely either responsible for seeing a part of the project implemented, or would be directly affected by a potential delay, failure, or problem if an unforeseen risk was missed.

6. Design your pitch to solve your partner's problem

Sure, your partner was unaware a problem existed until you brought it to their attention. Yes, the

problem is actually a result of the new rule or regulation you are trying to comply with. But you are not the problem.

You are the person saving your partner from an embarrassing omission. Not because you point out the problem. That will just get you killed as the messenger of bad news. But because you point out the problem and come with a ready-made solution.

7. Be prepared to implement your solution without help

Perfect compliance is not the goal at this stage. You want to start small, with something that you can do and do correctly and well. Your partner needs to understand that you are not asking for anything but to spend *your own* valuable time and effort on helping solve *their* problem.

8. Meet others on the main project

Once you are officially working on the main strategic priority, even though it is in your narrow area of interest, ask your partner to involve you in broader meetings. If you have been constructive, helpful, not asked for any resources, and not caused any new problems, you should be OK.

9. Gently spread your idea

This should be mainly through awareness raising amongst others working on the project: For example, that the issue is out there, that it has real-world consequences, and that you are working on a solution to a narrow piece of it.

Your goal is to get people in other areas of responsibility to acknowledge the issue in their own presentations. If you are very lucky, some of them will look into the topic on their own and may identify additional risks/opportunities for further implementation.

10. Ride the wave

Either your issue has real-world relevance, or it does not. If the issue is relevant, then you will have:

- Put yourself in a position to bring it to the attention of relevant people who are in a position to do something about it;
- Shown yourself to be selfless and helpful, a good team member; and
- Demonstrated yourself as a subject-matter expert with knowledge about the issue. If your issue is not yet ripe, or has been over-exaggerated by the expert class promoting consulting services, or your company is not yet ready, etc., you will still have made a good first step and laid the foundation for future steps when circumstances change.

Or, if all this sounds too time-consuming or Machiavellian, by all means, pitch your project directly to the CEO. I recommend telling your CEO that yours is the most important project in the world, and that the company has to drop everything to implement it immediately. Let me know how it goes.

Be well.

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