

Got Strategy?

Planning for Success: Don't Flub the Kickoff!

By Global Aperture LLC

A great game plan starts with a powerful kickoff. When the stakes are high and resistance might be fierce, the right initiative done the right way can produce huge results. Implement the approaches outlined here so that you and your team will be playing full out from the first to the last whistle.

We've seen hundreds of initiatives, from 30,000-employee change management projects to a "dirty dozen" team giving a "billion dollar" presentation of a lifetime. While the stakes vary from project to project, what we've learned is that a powerful kickoff is a high leverage opportunity to put your project quickly on the right track.

One of our senior clients was recently tasked to improve his group's competitiveness. Using the five key techniques below, his team launched an amazing kickoff and has quickly gained traction on an initiative with over \$1B at stake over the next five years. Risk was mitigated in advance, and the team is building major influence throughout the organization. By addressing these questions, they greatly increased their odds of winning the game:

1 | What does success look like?

Every initiative starts off with a sketch of a vision that's been handed to you to implement and make work. There are lots of details still missing, and those are what you'll want to get clear on before and during your kickoff.

Start to add color to the sketch before the kickoff itself. Doing this informal work up front can engage the team and motivate people to get on board quickly. Begin with your own ideas of what success looks like and how you will know that the initiative is complete. In other words, know where the goal posts are. We call this the "doneness test". Then build on and socialize your ideas by including input from your boss, your customers and other stakeholders. Ask them to describe in detail how they, their team, and their organization's performance could benefit if the initiative were successful. Use what you learn to further develop the vision.

2 | What's the kickoff plan?

The kickoff meeting (whether virtual, face to face, or a combination) is essentially a high-level planning session. Not surprisingly, an effective planning session requires a solid plan. First, consider what kind of conversational approach you want to take with the

team. Sometimes a kickoff requires a narrow "command-and-control" aperture, and other times you want to open up the conversational aperture to allow for a wider range of input and possible solutions.

Next, consider who should be on the team, making sure those important perspectives inside and outside your organization are represented. Once you've decided on whom and the best approach, develop the tools and content to help you lead the session. An agenda (of course) is step one, and you may also want to create a visual presentation to focus the session and perhaps record the meeting.

3 | How will you elicit the best ideas?

Not only does the kickoff set the tone for the entire initiative but it is also the time when ideas are the most fresh and unbounded. You don't want to miss this opportunity. As you execute your kickoff, pay special attention to document, clarify, and dig into the relevant issues and experiences of the team. Understand the stories each has – their lessons, scars, and wisdom. Find ways to build their ideas into your implementation plan. Better yet, use those experts to help you build that plan. By opening the aperture at this early stage, you will emerge with better ideas, more seasoned approaches, and a more involved team. Some of their stories might be excellent to inspire and mobilize the broader team down the road.

4 | Are you building-in risk mitigation?

There are four major risks with any initiative: it's the wrong initiative, it's the wrong approach, insufficient resources have been allocated, and/or there is insufficient sponsorship or buy-in. Says Global Aperture's Dave Whelan, "The kickoff meeting is the perfect place to assess these risks and develop mitigation plans. Make sure you are working on the right thing, that you have a flexible process to develop the optimal approach, and you secure enough appropriate resources and stakeholder buy-in." Lastly, don't expect your initial plan to be perfect. Adjust based on what you learn in the kickoff to create a plan that will serve as your baseline. You will want to invite others on the

CHECKLIST FOR LEADERS

- ☐ Create a "doneness test" – outcomes and objectives
- ☐ Select the right team to advise and support your initiative
- ☐ Create an aggressive but attainable schedule
- ☐ Build a "killer presentation" – vision of the future, top level plan
- ☐ Get the team aligned during the kickoff – seek their ideas
- ☐ Identify project risks and build mitigation into the plan
- ☐ End kickoff with clear vision – next session, action items
- ☐ Update your baseline – refine the plan
- ☐ Follow up – close actions quickly
- ☐ Communicate early and often

team to help refine the vision. Work multiple possible solutions in parallel until you are sure your plan is sound. This takes more time in the beginning but will ultimately deliver better outcomes.

5 | How will you create momentum?

Success is determined at the kickoff and in the days, not weeks, following. Quickly move into execution mode immediately following the kickoff. Document action items, update your presentation, and share the plan and status with everyone, including the team and all stakeholders. Continue to communicate regularly, especially as you make progress, and even if you get stalled. With a strong kickoff, you and your team are positioned to make significant, timely progress.

Based in Los Angeles, Global Aperture LLC is a strategic change management consulting firm with a unique approach to problem solving that blends ideas, people, and action. Our team is dedicated to helping leaders slice through complexity, improve focus, and build the capabilities that yield results.

For more information, please visit us at www.globalaperture.com