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The power of small steps in project management (case by Niklas Tiger)

Coert Visser, March 16, 2014 in: cases, interventions, Progress-focused | Jump To Comments

Two years ago I posted a post which I called [Taming the beast](#), which described a case by Niklas Tiger (he had originally posted it as a comment to this post: [Small steps are often the only way to start tackling problems that nearly overwhelm us](#)). Niklas wrote how my post had inspired him to start tackling the biggest problem in his organization with a small steps approach. He said that he and his colleagues has just started but that they felt that they were already on top of things and that success was just around the corner. Now Niklas has posted an update, again in the comment section, in reply to a question by another reader who wondered what had further happened to Niklas' case. Here is Niklas' update:



Hi! I actually wrote a piece on this about a year ago and my idea was to post it here but somehow I forgot about it. Anyway, I found it so here it is along with some additional thoughts, now two years later.

The initial results were mind-blowing. Within less than a week we had turned the feeling of hopelessness into actually seeing some light in the tunnel (and believing it was NOT the train). Now, we had previously made many efforts over the years that had failed. Big plans, lots of ideas on what we needed to accomplish, great visions on how it should work out in a perfect world, and so on. We had also usually felt quite optimistic that we would succeed when plans initially were drawn up. But reality had always proved us wrong, and hope had fainted with each failed attempt. So, the very interesting question was: Would it be different this time? Even though the small steps that we had initially taken provided some hope and moved us a bit forward, the challenge was still just as huge and difficult. We still had miles and miles to go, so would the story actually be different in the end? I was definitely curious to find out.

Also, since the problem covered so many parts of our organization, customer demands/expectations, different technologies and employee skills along with fundamental changes to many crucial work processes, we needed to make those changes while at the same time maintaining full operation. Otherwise we would be at serious risk of going out of business. Therefore, I had always imagined this to be a project that would need at least a year (or possibly more) to be carried out. In this, I really didn't have a clear picture of all the things we needed to do, but I realized that there were lots and lots to be done before we were finished (if ever). All ranging from designing new work processes, redesigning organizational roles and responsibilities, designing and implementing IT support systems and training people to mention a few. So a year would probably be quite tight.

I would find myself to be terribly wrong - in a very good way. Only two and a half months later we were actually done! All the changes we needed to make were in place, everybody had been trained, organizational changes were carried out and we had also designed and

implemented IT-systems to support the new processes from beginning to end. The result were truly amazing! Once the snowball started to turn, there was actually no stopping it.

One thing I find interesting is trying to figure out how this actually happened. What was the main difference and the drive that made us succeed? What was the main reason that made the small steps method work so well? My initial feeling was that small steps would be a good way of getting things started, but after that maybe we would need to revert to more traditional project planning- and work methods to keep momentum? We resisted though, because we really wanted to find out if small steps would take us all the way. And it did, a lot quicker and more accurate than what would have been the case if we along the way would have sat down and created the “big plan project” (which I believe would even have introduced the risk of us failing once again). Instead, every time we came to a point where we felt we had lost some momentum or we felt unsure on how to move on, we sat down and recollected all the things that had taken place already, finding the next small step in each area (and sometimes selecting only one or two) that would be the next ones to take. In doing this, there was little or no energy wasted on things that might need to be done later on (future decisions to be made, challenges to be conquered, etc). Instead we were focusing only on what we needed to do in the present.

It's quite easy to understand why it works once you think about it, but I still don't think that's the key success factor. Instead, the main drive in us completing this project in such a sensationally short time and with such great results, is that once we knew exactly what do to in detail, we couldn't wait to actually do it! When something is fun or inspiring to do, you will make time in your schedule - sooner rather than later (even if there is no time) - just because you simply can't wait! I find the opposite is also true. If the task assigned to you is too large, too complex or it's difficult to figure out in detail what it is you need to do, then you will tend to fill an even empty schedule with other things to do instead of getting started. At the same time, in the back of your head, a process of figuring out how you should go about the task is going to consume energy from whatever you're occupied with. To figure this out can take a long time, and sometimes it never happens. It's neither fun nor easy to try to do something when you don't actually know where to start. If that happens, the best thing is usually to go back to the drawing table and figure out an even smaller (and more understandable) step towards what you want to achieve.

So I find the key difference here is making tasks understandable, in a very low tech way, which then will make them fun to carry out (because very soon afterwards you will be enjoying the results). Focusing on making every step extremely understandable (what we are actually going to do and what we want the result of that very step to be), is crucial to success and a huge drive if done properly. I really think it is as easy as that. Or as hard as that... To me, a good way of making sure that a task is easy enough to understand is checking if I could explain what I am about to do to a five-year-old. If my task is described in “million dollar words” such as “I need to redesign some work processes for releasing changes in our data center to ensure a higher level of quality” I am at risk of getting nowhere. Once I have figured out that this task actually means “I will make I checklist that anyone making changes in our data center can follow” it's time to get to work.

In the end we turned our overwhelming challenge into a series of small and fun activities, each one producing a little but clearly noticeable result. All of a sudden we found we had run out of tasks, because we were all done! Of course we have also used many other SF tools along the way that have proved very useful in different situations. But without the small steps

approach I still think we wouldn't have got the job done. Also in designing new work processes we have used SF tools and the words "simple, usable, practical and understandable" when making sure they are being designed properly. We have also always tried identify and build on what we already have that works, to really make sure we design something that actually can and will be used. It turned out we really had 85-90% of what we needed already in place so instead of tearing everything down and trying to start all over (which would also have meant we would have torn down a bunch of already very good working structures) we just added a little on top and got everything working really well without rebuilding everything and having the need of training everyone on something completely new.

Another perspective is getting everybody's head in the game. When attacking something very difficult together, each one contributing with small actions, it's a great to be able to share the success with the many people involved. It brings a lot of positive energy and builds a feeling of "being able to move mountains" into the group. After conquering this problem - what is there we cannot achieve if we really put our mind to it? Also - we know it is not something to fear - we know we can do it and enjoy it at the same time!

In summary: To me this project has been the best of proofs showing that leading a project using SF and the power small steps really can create magical results! Now this was two years ago, and we have kept working with small steps in refining everything since. This is now one of the areas in our company that we are most proud of and we gladly talk about how well managed our data center is. But as always everything changes and we are now battling new challenges that have come with the success we've had in selling service from our data center. We have grown our practice so much that we now need to replace many manual work processes and quality checks, initially nicely designed and working well, with automated ones. Of course we do this step by step always thinking of what small ones would bring the most value at each point in time. It's a continuous work that will never end, but it's also great fun!

Also, customers now ask us to help them implement the similar structures within their IT departments. Now that is the time to resist using our project as a template in any other way than saying to the customer - "We will help you in doing whatever you need to be done in very small and efficient steps. In the end it might look like what we did - but then again - it could be something completely different only because that was a better way of doing it in your organization." So using SF in customer projects is now a common thing, but that's a different (and also a very good) story! 😊