10 Common Barriers to the Progress of any Business Initiative … *(and what to do about them)*

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One of the most common challenges faced by management today is dealing with key programs that are not progressing as fast, or as well, as planned. Programs, projects, initiatives or strategic ventures – independent of what you name them - all fall victim to stalls or barriers in progress and process. In business these stalls usually mean a delay in cash flow, and we probably all agree that is undesirable.

If you asked a room full of CEOs, mid-level managers or consultants about this common phenomenon, they would likely all nod their heads in knowing agreement at the mention of the frustration that builds up from dealing with program delays. Some might be resigned to it and claim that the problem of delays is simply a way of life in business… inevitable. That may be true, but there are some relatively simple ways to mitigate the impact of delays and diagnose the sticking points before delays result in disaster.

Discovering the primary causes and barriers to progress requires three key components of good management; a) frequent checkpoints and b) immediate confrontation of the delay and c) specific diagnostic and corrective action.

I liken the challenge to a scene from the movie Fiddler on the Roof. Tevia, a poor farmer in Czarist Russia, is trying to deliver large cans of fresh milk from his farm on the outskirts of town to the townspeople. He is pushing a large, two-wheeled wooden cart to the town square for distribution. He's pushing the cart because his horse has come up lame and he is dedicated and determined to fulfill his obligation to deliver. The cart is very heavy. He pushes in the heat…on a dirt road.

It struck me as I watched this scene that if a pebble in the road were to find its way into the path of either cart wheel, progress would immediately come to a halt. Tevia would be faced with a simple dilemma. In order to continue his journey he'd have to lift a 600-pound cart a couple of inches over the pebble, or diagnose and discover the obstacle and lift a 4 ounce pebble out of the way.

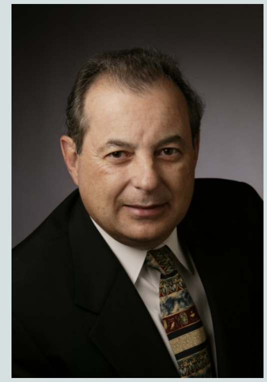
Then the insight struck*: It's discovering and removing the pebbles, not pushing or lifting the cart, that is the real challenge in making progress in business*.

Frequent check points are the equivalent of stopping for a moment looking ahead and avoiding the pebbles before they get in the way, by either adjusting direction or running ahead to remove the observed pebble from the path of the cart wheel.

But then it occurred to me that in order to know what to do you would need to know exactly what kind of pebble you were confronting. Thinking deeper, I discovered that pebbles come in different forms and types, 10 types more or less, and they all, coincidentally, begin with the letter "C".

The Pebbles in the way of your Business Initiative Cart:

Checkpoints: Progress checkpoints are the first and single most important "C". They are essential and should be frequent. These checkpoint sessions should be labeled "working sessions" not "meetings" or "progress reviews" to set the right flavor and avoid the accusation of micro-management. Managers should participate, hands-on, in solving problems and accelerating progress.



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Working sessions should end with the following questions, a) Does anyone see any additional barriers immediately ahead of us in the road? b) Who is specifically going to do what, by when, to remove the discovered pebbles? and c) When is our next working session?

Confrontation: A combination of objectivity, tough-mindedness and social courage is required to confront a delay discovered in a working session. Once discovered it takes patience to stick with the discussion through to the detail, which will allow diagnosis of the specific cause and formulation of a remedial action plan. In 15-plus years of consulting, I have found that the lack of these first two C's (Checkpoints and Confrontation) are extremely common at all management levels. If the CEO or division leader exemplifies this lack of discipline for checkpoints and confrontational courage, the organization at all levels will reflect that "looseness" of good management discipline and process. One final point, Confrontation does not mean argument—it means persistence and determination to see a discussion through until a solution or path to a solution is agreed on.

The next 8 C's list the root causes of delays.

Capacity: Sometimes delays are caused by insufficient personal or organizational time available to address them. Many times delays that result from capacity limits are really related to inappropriate priorities.

Capability: Occasionally a delay is created by an individual's total lack of understanding of how to tackle the barrier or next challenge. In this case, training or outside expertise needs to be immediately added to the mix to get the pebble out of the path of the cartwheel. This is a particularly nefarious "C" because individuals rarely want to admit that they simply don't have the skills or knowledge to get around the problem. Which brings us to Courage.

Courage: Progress often requires personal behavioral change. We all know how difficult it is to accomplish behavioral change, personally and organizationally. Courage comes into play most often, when an individual does not have Capability but is afraid to admit it..

A second type of Courage is organizational. We have a good example to learn from in the foundational business changes that were made in the 1980's with the adoption of **Total Quality** disciplines by most manufacturing firms in the country. One of the primary tenets and enablers of success was first to "drive out fear." Honest, open communications, generated from data and fact, and rewarding people who identify and overcome barriers earlier rather than later, help drive out fear and build individual Courage to do what is right.

Co-operation: The lack of cooperation might be from an individual in the project team or other related departments or organizations that need to have the priority raised to accelerate movement.

Cognition: Ever get off the airplane only to be jammed up at the exit into the terminal by Grandma hugging all her six grandchildren right in front of you? She has stopped and stalled progress, but is oblivious to the consequences of her behavior. Sometimes people simply don't know they are in the way of progress by their inaction or by what they are doing that's contrarian.

Criticality: The negative economic implications of delays (and the positive economic implications of rapid success) should be visible to all members of a project team. Creating and sustaining a sense of urgency is essential by the ultimate manager responsible for the P&L impact of the program.

Credibility: Do the team members believe that there is a need for the change initiative? Do they trust the judgment of the management team, based on a good track record of success, a good direction and sound leadership in the past? Trust doesn't happen overnight and a lack of trust, may linger just beneath the surface, as a pebble that is difficult to see – perhaps buried in a small puddle. You can't see the pebble, but you can feel its effect. If you hear the phrase, "Program du-jour," in the ranks of the team, you may be afflicted by this pebble.

Capital: Sometimes funding is needed to overcome a barrier. In some cases there is an ingrained philosophy of not asking for funding. To overcome hesitancy, set expectations at the beginning of an initiative to make capital-related issues visible immediately.

Example: Persistent "C" Questions

In a recent client engagement I was working on a problem that was exhibiting itself as a weak sales pipeline. When I asked the sales manager what he thought the barriers were, he answered, "Time. (In our vocabulary that's **Capacity**). He continued. "We have to baby-sit every project opportunity from birth to death." I suggested that they document the customer engagement process, divide it into phases and assign different phases to different organizations – freeing up their time to engage more new customers and new projects. I simply got stunned silence as a response.

I asked, "Is there anything else in the way? He said, "Training. We don't know how to use the pipeline management system." (In our vocabulary that's **Capability**). We scheduled training for the next sales meeting.

"Anything else", I asked? He said, "The system isn't designed for our business". They ordered a new, easy-to -deploy system that fit the business better. It would be installed in the next 45 days— in time for the next sales meeting and training. (**Capital**)

Anything else? He said nothing.

I then suggested a working session (**Checkpoint**) for the following week to assess what progress they were making and identify any barriers.

These pebbles in front of their "cart of progress" had existed for two or more years. In one hour, using our list of "Cs" we identified and began the process of removing them. You can too if you have the Commitment and the Courage to Confront them.

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