

Leadership/Project Evaluation Survey & Results

Why Do Many Projects Fail to Get the Support They Need in Order to Succeed?

Maybe leaders don't need new project and change management approaches, or more training, or even more books. I believe many of them already know what to do - they just aren't doing what it takes to build strong support for their ideas.

Perhaps a real problem in building support for projects and other big changes is what people in sports call unforced errors. Players know what to do – and how to do it – they simply take their eyes off the ball at some key moment and that could be the turning point in the game.

Those were my assumptions when I recently conducted an anonymous survey of 216 people from around the world.

This is my first cut at analyzing the results.

Highlights of What I Have Learned So Far

I asked survey participants to focus on a change or major project in their organization that they believe failed because it lacked sufficient support from stakeholders. So I asked them if any of the seven key mistakes occurred. And if so, what impact those mistakes had on the failure of the project. Finally, I asked how difficult it would have been for those leaders to avoid those mistakes before they ever occurred.

Unwitting mistakes – or unforced errors – are certainly not the only reason why leaders fail to build support, but these mistakes occur more often than anticipated and often with devastating results. And, these mistakes are often avoidable.

The Seven Mistakes

Prior to developing the survey, I interviewed some leaders and fellow consultants to get their reaction to my thoughts about the impact of unforced errors. They agreed that

committing avoidable mistakes was a big deal. Then I asked if they could give me an example. And could they! The seven mistakes listed below came from those interviews as well as from my own experience working on change projects with clients.

1. Leader(s) shifted his or her attention and perhaps resources to other things before the project was fully implemented. (22.22% believed this mistake had the strongest negative impact.)
2. Leader(s) didn't engage people in decisions affecting planning and implementation. (18.06% selected this mistake.)
3. Leader(s) failed to make sure people knew why a change was even needed. (15.74%)
4. Leader(s) didn't have a robust plan for gaining the support of key stakeholders. (15.74%)
5. Leader(s) had no way of telling day-to-day if people were supporting, resisting, or were indifferent to the change. (15.28%)
6. Many stakeholders never had trust or confidence in the leader(s). (8.80%)
7. Leader(s) never considered what could go wrong. (4.17%)

Impact of These Mistakes

The question read: On a scale of 1 to 4, rate the impact of this mistake on the failure of the change/project.

1. No impact	0.46%
2.	9.72%
3.	36.11%
4. Major impact	53.70%

Difficulty in Avoiding Mistakes

The question read: If the leader(s) has anticipated the possibility that this mistake could occur, how difficult would it have been for this leader(s) to avoid this problem?

1. Not difficult at all	22.43%
2. Some difficulty	39.25%
3. Difficult	21.03%
4. Even if they knew it would have been difficult to avoid this problem	17.29%

Implications

When I look at the scores for the *Impact of These Mistakes* and the *Difficulty in Avoiding Mistakes* together, I see some interesting implications. See what you think.

- As I look at the survey results, it appears that many mistakes regarding building support are avoidable. Sixty-two percent could have avoided the problem with little difficulty.
- If leaders had stepped back and considered what they were about to do (or not do), that might have been enough. It seemed that in many cases leaders had the skills needed to avoid those mistakes.
- Leaders may not need to find a new project planning model, a new book on leadership, or go to another workshop. They may already know what to do. If that's the case, the challenge is for them to find ways to pay attention to what they already know is important.
- I think this is all good news. (I realize that some mistakes will require more effort to avoid. That's where gaining more knowledge and skills practice could help. I also realize that some leaders make these mistakes and the errors are not unforced. They simply don't believe that they need to pay attention to building support.) But, for many leaders and their consultants the way forward might be easier than they think.

My Own Next Steps

What you're reading is my first cut at understanding the survey results. Here are some of things I plan to explore further.

I plan to:

- Dig deeper into the comments people wrote to explain their scores. (I often find that these narrative comments are where the gold lies.)
- Look more closely at how various groups responded and see what the implications might be.
- Compare results on types of changes. (I gave them a list of types of projects to choose from. They could choose more than one category: Information Technology, Quality Improvement and Continuous Improvement, Human Resources, Marketing or Sales, Reorganization, Manufacturing/Production, Merger Integration, and other.)
- Some people responded that the biggest reason why the projects failed was not on my list of mistakes. I plan to look closely at those comments.
- I am curious about survey results that suggest that the leaders would have had a great deal of difficulty changing their behavior. I'm not sure if there is sufficient data in the survey for me to learn much, but I am interested in trying to learn more.
- If there is some aspect of these results that you would like me to explore more deeply, please let me know. Your suggestions will help me decide where to focus my attention over the coming weeks.
- And if you have your own unforced error to add to this list, please let me know. The list of seven is by no means a definitive list.

About Rick Maurer

I work with senior leaders on ways to build support for change. Some leaders put me on retainer, others bring me in to assist on a particular project, and others just want to have a couple of conversations about leading change. I've worked with clients in the industries of aerospace, healthcare, chemicals, government, high-tech, and others.

I also offer speaking and strategic work session opportunities from keynote speeches at large-scale conferences to short seminars and breakout sessions on avoiding resistance and building support for change. I call my approach, Change without Migraines™. It is based on my book, *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* (Bard Press 1996, revised 2010).

If you need help figuring out how people view your leadership during change, I can help.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Maurer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

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