

Tackling a challenge

Laser focus will be needed when taking on a difficult responsibility

Question:

In addition to my current role as vice president of marketing, I have been asked to assume responsibility for a business line that is losing money. The mandate is to improve the bottom-line by 30 percent and cut personnel by 28 percent by the end of the year. I don't want to be tagged as not being a team player and have future opportunities restricted. What should I negotiate up front to improve my chances of success?

Response:

Assuming responsibility for a failing business line is a significant undertaking, especially when simultaneously managing the tasks associated with your role as V.P. of marketing. For you to be successful, the first negotiation is with yourself. You must "own" your success with absolute certainty. You must know that you are capable of meeting the desired expectations as opposed to spending time overcoming doubt, fear and the inevitable feelings of

being overwhelmed.

A leader's mood is contagious. If you embrace this project with feelings of uncertainty, doubt or fear, the emotional fortitude of your team will be undermined. To the contrary, if you step into this role convinced that success is imminent, your determination and resilience will positively "infect" your team's attitude.

Once you are convinced of your success, you will need to develop some self-management tools. Your success is dependant upon your ability to stay focused and on plan. I would recommend creating a project map spreadsheet that details the core elements of the project including key goals/initiatives, resources needed, action steps, deadline dates, accountability, costs and a space for your commentary. At a glance, you and your boss can readily assess what progress has been made, current goals and future initiatives. It will also help you determine when you need to negotiate with other departments when additional services are needed.

Next, with a project of this magnitude, you will need to prioritize your goals. I would suggest developing a litmus test to best prioritize how you invest your time and energy.

Here are some sample questions to consider:

- **"Does this goal align with the company's strategy?"** In a time of rapidly changing company strategies, it's important to regularly reevaluate your goals to ensure they align with company directives.
- **"What's the economic impact?"** How will this goal affect the company economically while advancing the goals of this project?
- **"How will it satisfy stakeholders?"** How important is this goal to

your boss, your team and other interested parties?

- **"What is your level of passion, talent and energy for it?"** If you cannot bring all three to the table, you will not achieve a high level of return on your efforts.
- **"Do we have the resources?"** Is there sufficient time, money and any other necessary resources to accomplish this goal on the timing we want to?
- **"What is a realistic timeline to accomplish the goal?"** Can you achieve the goal in a timeframe that will meet stakeholders' needs or will you need to renegotiate the expectations?

Once this is complete, move on to your next negotiation, which will be with your boss. To be successful, your goals need to align with both your boss' priorities, as well as the organization's. Quality and timely communication is critical. You will be operating in a dynamic environment in which changes will take place quickly. Schedule regular meetings to review your plan, your progress and strategies, and secure input from him or her. This will eliminate surprises and, to the degree possi-

Ask yourself...

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ble, minimize rework.

During these meetings, listen carefully. Identify and clarify new information that he may present to you. Review how these developments may influence your plans. Discuss your next-step action plans before leaving his or her office so you have the buy-in needed to move forward. Consider, at least initially, scheduling “standing appointments” on a weekly, or biweekly basis, to eliminate being blacked out on his or her calendar.

During the project, you might experience “dark days.” These are times when you emotionally hit rock bottom and are in need of support and encouragement. It will be important to know if your boss is someone you can go to when you are discouraged and need to refocus. You never want to make the assumption he or she truly has an open door policy when this is not truly the case.

Your next strategic negotiation will be with your team. It will be important to secure their input, feedback and concerns up front. I recommend scheduling an all-day meeting, off-site if possible, to eliminate distractions and walk through the scope of the project and target goals.

Then, working in teams, have them work through specific elements of the project to detail how they recommend mapping out the steps and completing the tasks. Rather than just telling them what needs to be done, you are providing them with an opportunity to develop the plan and take ownership of their success. It may be advantageous to hire

an outside facilitator so you have the freedom to move between groups and answer questions as needed.

Once a plan is initially developed, have it transposed into a spreadsheet so every member of the team has a copy.

You have a unique opportunity at this meeting to set the tone for the project. Share your truths – it’s a daunting project, but achievable with the right level of focus and commitment. How well the team defines the responsibilities, tasks, action plans, and deadlines will determine if they are positioned to deliver the desired results or not.

Accountability and communication are two cornerstones in determining your team’s success. Therefore, you might consider identifying two or three people within the team who are the designated “truth speakers.” These are the people who will tell you the things you don’t want to hear about the project, about yourself or about issues that have developed that may delay or derail the project.

The last thing you want is for people to tell you what they think you want to hear, rather than what you need to hear in order to make smart decisions.



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