

Quality info

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How to Prevent Failure When Shifting to Working From Home 1

Use this three-step process to prevent disasters in implementing decisions

So many companies are shifting their employees to working from home to address the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. Yet they're not considering the potential quality disasters that can occur as a result of this transition.

An example of this is what one of the companies experienced more than a year before the pandemic hit. Prasad is the risk and quality management executive in a medical services company with about 600 employees. He was one of the leaders tasked by his company's senior management team with shifting the company's employees to a work-from-home setup, due to rising rents on their office building.

Specifically, Prasad led the team that managed risk and quality issues associated with the transition for all 600 employees to telework, due to his previous experience in helping small teams of three to six people in the company transition to working from home in the past. The much larger number of people who had many more diverse roles they had to assist now was proving to be a challenge. So was the short amount of time available to this project, which was only four weeks, and resulted from a failure in negotiation with the landlord of the office building.

Three key steps to preventing disasters in implementing decisions

Prasad used the "failure-proofing" strategy, which is a pragmatic and easy-to-use technique to defend against planning and project disasters.

Step 1: Imagine that the decision, project, or process definitely failed, and brainstorm reasons for why your plan failed.

Meet with your key stakeholders and discuss your plan. Make sure to provide all the details. Next, ask the participants to imagine a future where the plan failed. Doing so empowers everyone, even those who are confident that the plan will succeed, to tap their creativity in coming up with potential reasons for the failure.

Each participant should anonymously write out three possible reasons why the plan failed. The reasons should include internal decisions within the scope of the project team, such as manpower or budget restrictions. It should also include potential external factors, such as policies set by government agencies.

Next, the facilitator gathers the participants' statements and discusses the central themes raised as reasons for the plan's failure. The facilitator should highlight reasons that would not usually be brought up if the process of writing down the reasons and discussing them was not anonymous. If you will be doing this technique by yourself, list separate reasons for the plan's failure.

Going back to Prasad, he decided to gather six stakeholders composed of one manager each from the four departments that urgently needed to be shifted to a work-from-home setup, as well as one team leader from each of the two teams that would provide auxiliary support to Prasad's team while it was facilitating the risk and quality challenges associated with the transition of the teams. He recruited Priya, a member of the firm's advisory board, to be an independent facilitator.

Priya discussed the current plan, which was to shift all 600 employees to a remote work setup in four weeks. Everything—even business meetings—would be done online after four weeks. Prasad's team would address the problems in migrating the 600 employees to a remote work setup in four weeks, which would occur in batches of 150 employees per week.

After outlining the plan, everyone submitted their anonymous reasons for failure. Priya read out the participants' statements, which highlighted one key area of risk: the plan failed because it wasn't communicated in a clear and timely manner. Most of the participants raised doubts that management could communicate the plan efficiently due

to past cases of miscommunication of company change initiatives. Such miscommunication posed a huge threat to quality and risk issues in this transition.

A secondary area of risk and quality concerns involved managing Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliance regarding patient-related information. The company stored these records in paper form, and they would need to be digitized and easily accessible to relevant staff with appropriate security in the move to working from home. Such documents required particularly careful handling to prevent the medical services company from violating regulatory requirements and losing government contracts, which represented about 45 percent of the company's revenue.

Step 2: Brainstorm ways to fix problems and integrate your ideas into the plan.

Pick several plan failures to highlight that are the most relevant, and think of ways to solve these, including how to tackle possible mental blind spots and cognitive biases. In addition, present any evidence you might use that would serve as an indicator that the failure you are addressing is happening or about to happen. For this particular step, it is critical to have people with authority in the room.

The facilitator writes down the potential solutions. If you are going through this step by yourself, ask for outside input at this point.

Circling back to Prasad's discussion group, Usha, the HR VP, took on the task of addressing the communication problem proactively.

Usha committed to bringing up the communication issues tackled in the discussion group with the CEO and COO. She proposed for these senior leaders to send out a companywide announcement on the migration to telecommuting and the steps that will be taken.

Then, each senior manager would have in-person meetings with their direct reports in middle management, to get their buy-in and ensure that the message passed effectively down the chain of command. In turn, the middle managers would meet with the frontline staff and work out details of the next steps for each team.

To address the issues around HIPAA compliance required more attention to quality and risk management in digitizing all records and then storing them in a safe place in the

cloud. The team decided that the records division would be included in the last batch to be migrated. It would take that additional time to convert all documents to digital form in a safe manner, while also finding the best software options and internal process to maintain the right combination of security and accessibility.

Step 3: Imagine that the decision, project, or process succeeded spectacularly. Brainstorm ways of achieving this outcome, and integrate your ideas into the plan.

We tackled failure, so now let's imagine that your plan succeeded superbly. This way, your organization can maximize its success.

Imagine that you are in a future where your plan succeeded beyond expectations. Ask each participant to anonymously write out possible reasons for the plan's success. After that, ask the facilitator to focus on the key themes.

Next, the facilitator gathers everyone's statements and leads the group in discussing the reasons given. Assess anonymously the potential of each reason for success and decide which ones need to be focused on. After that, come up with ways of maximizing these reasons for success.

The facilitator writes down the ideas to maximize the plan's success. If you are going through this step by yourself, ask for outside input at this point.

In Prasad's discussion group, Priya asked each participant to anonymously write out the reasons for the plan's success. When Priya read out the statements, there was one key theme: The plan succeeded because the management was very responsive to anxieties and concerns from employees during the transition.

To address this concern, Prasad's team set up a number that staff could text or call, which was always staffed by some members of the team. Then, they could quickly answer questions, or route the question to the person who had the answer.

Conclusion

To prevent work-from-home disasters in this time of transitioning to telework to manage the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, make sure to use the "failure-proofing" technique prior to implementing decisions of any significance, as well as to assess the management of substantial projects and processes. This technique can help address

the many dangerous judgment errors, called cognitive biases, that quality professionals may fall into unless they take the steps needed to defeat such mental blind spots.

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**Edited by : Hari K Taneja, Trustee,
D. L. Shah Trust
email: dlshahtrust@gmail.com
Phone: 022-2309 6529
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