Leadership Symptoms that Threaten Projects

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After working with thousands of engineers who have developed brilliant, yet unimplemented/unsuccessful energy solutions, I have concluded that there are some key non-technical factors that influence the success of projects. Knowing how to navigate these is critical to the success of your project.

I have already written widely and even recorded training (free) on how to "sell energy projects". However, I have realized that these techniques are only useful when working with a company/organization/client that is capable of taking effective action. In this article- I would like to share some symptoms of leadership problems that usually impact projects. If you can recognize these symptoms early, you may be able to avoid pitfalls, or avoid a project that is doomed to failure.

Assessing Leadership
There is no perfect "test" of leadership, but here are some tips/questions that may help you "qualify" a client or potential project.

Question #1: Is there a written Mission Statement that aligns all employees toward a common goal? *This is important because if there is no "leadership" pulling a client/organization in a particular direction… your energy project cannot "align" with that course. If your project is not "aligned", it will likely not get done.*

All companies periodically have leadership changes, and during these times- employees can continue to perform (make decisions that result in progress) when guided by a clear mission statement. Conversely, some organizations lose their leader and become "rudderless". If a new leader does not take command, chart a course and enforce progress; the mid-level managers begin delaying decisions (which can directly delay the approval of your project). After a while- a "culture of indecision" becomes the norm that permeates the organization. This new culture literally sets up "entitlement" for everyone to avoid taking risks and "just maintain".

In addition to a "top-down" approach… good leaders also listen to and empower their employees/partners for "win-win" relationships. If a leader ignores the team's good ideas, the team members will stop providing new ideas. If team members feel "undervalued", they may seek work elsewhere, where their ideas are valued (and rewarded).

The point of the previous two paragraphs is that when you are considering a project… observe the "alignment" of the employees, because that will tell you a lot about the organization, as well as where your energy project is headed.

Question #2: Does the organization knowingly fail to comply with legally required safety or other laws?

Organizations that don't take care of safety are not going to care about your energy project (which is usually optional anyway). For example, a couple of years ago, I was doing an audit and walked into a new boiler room that had over 10 major safety violations (national and state code violations on piping, valves and other infrastructure). My partner even smelled natural gas in the air within the boiler room. We stopped the energy audit and let the management know about their OSHA and code violations, because if an explosion were to happen, they would be liable and could lose millions of dollars in legal costs, as well as lost lives! This mid-level management team basically ignored us, mostly because "their division was experiencing budget cuts and they felt they couldn't get the funding to fix the problems". So- guess how far this energy audit's projects went? The audit was nearly a complete waste of time.

Question #3: How would you describe the "image" of the organization?

I remember a client where I had found over $ 6 million in savings… and they implemented many of the projects. However, a few years later, I went back for a follow-up audit and noticed they had cut their maintenance budget and weren't fixing the facilities to a reasonable level. This one decision to cut maintenance resulted in a decline of image and employee morale.

Example- there was a large steam leak visible from the parking lot and employee entrance, which was not repaired for over a year, and every employee (including the energy manager) saw this leak every day before getting to work. My question is: "how are you going to motivate employees to save energy, when management won't spend the money to fix the most obvious leak that everyone sees every day?" *This is analogous to telling your kids to clean up their rooms while you dump the kitchen garbage on the front doorstep.*

The “image” of an organization can also be visible via the employee’s attitudes and behaviors. Beyond the obvious warning of seeing many low-productivity employees… the failure of management to “clean house” and improve performance is an indication that management may not be able to embrace your energy “improvement” project.

Further comments for managers… if you don't get rid of a poor performer, the good employees will have to work harder to cover the slack. Without reward for the extra work- you will likely lose the good employees. A “poor performer” is not a bad person… just someone who needs to change jobs to find a place where they can be excellent.

The subjects mentioned above may seem “obvious”, but I can tell you that I have missed these symptoms before… and it cost me a lot of time. Hopefully, this advice will help you avoid making the same mistakes.

Conclusion

Although this is a very short list of questions you could ask… I know that answering these questions will help you evaluate whether you are working with (or within) an organization that is CAPABLE of making a decision on your “improvement” project. Navigating successful projects through these obstacles requires identifying these types of barriers so you can find a path to success. Once you have identified one of these symptoms, I have found it best to communicate this concern early… sometimes management will recognize the symptom and take corrective action.

Conversely- when you are working with fast-moving organizations… be prepared and make it “easy” for the client to make the decision without a lot of detail (because they are busy and making other decisions too)… Don’t hinder a “leader”!