



The Power of Focus can spell success

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A little while ago the Redmond crowd quietly released a new version of a small but powerful collaboration product: SharePoint. What I found incredible about this was that the masters of hoopla and hyp, in my opinion, missed an opportunity to bang the drum with their usual flare.

Instead a small press release and a mention buried in the back pages of the Microsoft website was really all the hoopla I saw. Does this mean Microsoft has quit the major promotion extravaganzas? Hardly. Witness the major thrust the Redmond giant is placing on the announcement of Vista, its latest improvement in the desktop operating system.

So does this mean SharePoint 2007 is a dog? I haven't received a copy yet to be able to judge, but I suspect it will be like SharePoint 2003, only with more features to bring it in line with most of the collaboration market. So why would Microsoft or any corporation be perceived as downplaying a product announcement?

Perhaps Microsoft has learned from that marketing master IBM about the power of focus and coordination. While it has yet to be branded a business success, you can't deny that IBM's "on-demand" initiative has been a marketing success. Microsoft on the other hand, has been accused by its detractors of having a culture of everyone for themselves that weakens its strength in the marketplace.

So what does that have to do with engineering? Nothing and everything. During the 1960s and 1970s engineers were responsible for some of society's greatest achievements. Man walked on the moon; tremendous buildings were constructed and transportation was revolutionized.

I bring all this up to point out the power of focus. Not just your focus, but focus at a team level, a department level and a corporate level. NASA, GM, Toyota, Motorola, IBM, and Microsoft, despite the myths and hype, all achieved what they achieved because of focus. Sure the leaders of these corporations are smart and had vision, but what transformed them from also-rans into winners was getting the majority of their team focused on achieving a common goal.

So if we agree that focus is a major component of success what can you do about it? In my performance improvement and business process reengineering consulting practice, I spend much of my time teaching collaboration techniques and deploying tools to enable collaboration. So here are a few gems from my bag of tricks that I highly recommend. If you're not using any of them, go to your supervisor, chief engineer, or VP and ask to start implementing them at once. If you can't get a handle on deploying these tools and techniques, call in a specialist to aid you. I can assure you it will be worth the effort. If you need to put it in business speak, tell your VP of finance, it will have an ROI that will make their head spin.

1 First and foremost take a real hard look at the tools used in quality programs and initiatives. I know you're ducking for cover at the mere mention of quality programs, such as zero defects, TQM and Six Sigma. There are some diamonds to be found, however, almost every consulting engagement I do ends up with me teaching quality function deployment (QFD). While many people attribute this to the Japanese quality movement, it actually began in the 1940s with Admiral Leggett at General Electric as value engineering. After undergoing various refinements it's now known as QFD.

The basic premise is to prioritize requirements and answers to those requirements in a matrix according to what is desirable

to customers (i.e., if the customer isn't going to see it as worth buying why add it unless it's required by regulation?) This tool gets everyone on the team to focus on the most important elements of product development. It provides a means for engineering to talk with marketing, marketing to talk with customers, and engineering and manufacturing to coordinate their efforts.

2 Another matrix driven tool is Hoshin planning, which does for strategy and execution what QFD does for product design. Hoshin is a Japanese management technique brought to North America by GOAL/QC. The basic premise is identifying what needs to be achieved and dividing it up by how and who will achieve it. This is further subdivided into matrices until the tasks become readily apparent. Added to these matrices are measurements that gauge progress as well as define the goal itself. This method, like QFD, provides a common language, structure and coordination method that creates focus for not only your team, but other teams and potentially the whole corporation.

3 My third trick is Fishbone/cause effect diagrams — a simple but powerful tool. I am surprised when I have to re-teach the tool, not because people don't know the technique, but rather they didn't think to use it in this context. Cause/Effect, like the previous methods creates focus on the problem at hand and prioritizes the causes by either probability of occurrence, financial considerations or both.

With these basic three tools from my bag of tricks, I know you can create a powerful focus in you own organization.

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Originally Published in Advance Manufacturing Magazine April, 2007