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You Can't Aim a Duck to Death

Improvements Require More Than Ideas ... You Need Action, Too

By Tim Smith, Principal with The Plaid Group

Politician Gael Boardman has a philosophy about success that works wonders for both hunters and business leaders. His approach? "You can't aim a duck to death."

Hockey great Wayne Gretzky, who knows a few things about achieving – and scoring – goals, shares the same belief. "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take," he once said.

What Boardman and Gretzky point out is that it's not enough to think, plan or strategize. In order to achieve success – whether it's in duck hunting, hockey or business – you have to take action and see it through.

You probably can relate. Chances are your company's management team can identify a handful of things that need to be done to improve your business. Does this sound familiar? "We keep saying we're going to (fill in the blank), but we never do."

So what's holding you back? Like many companies, you're probably aiming but not shooting.

'Pulling The Trigger' On Ideas

While every situation is unique, there are eight common reasons why companies fail to successfully implement ideas or improvements. Be on the lookout for these project killers.

1. **Nobody is assigned responsibility for getting the project done.** This is, without a doubt, the most important part of ensuring success. There must be accountability. Name a project leader and a team, if

necessary, and provide them with the resources needed for success.

2. **Project team has no completion or interim milestone due dates.** As long as the project is open-ended, it will flounder. Put a stake in the ground and stand by it. Use milestone due dates to track progress.
3. **Project team does not understand the purpose and objective.** Make sure everyone understands the bottom-line value of the project. Is it to save money? Enhance customer service? Eliminate delays in production? Identify a primary benefit and communicate it thoroughly.
4. **Project team has no action plan.** Putting the plan in writing – either in a narrative document or by using a software program such as Microsoft Project – ensures that everyone knows what needs to be done and when.
5. **Project team lacks the knowledge and skills to complete the project.** Organizations often use workload to determine project teams, rather than capabilities. Make sure you have the right skill set for the task at hand.
6. **Project team members think other things are more important.** What level of priority does this project need? Team members must be aware of what is expected of them.
7. **There are no negative consequences for am not completing the project.** Employees will perform the tasks they know

their managers deem important. Make sure that progress is monitored and deadlines adhered to. If possible, ensure that project completion is part of every team member's periodic evaluation and variable compensation.

- 8. The project isn't part of the normal daily routine.** Don't let day-to-day tasks get in the way. If necessary, clear schedules or reassign regular responsibilities so that team members can focus on the project.

Four Simple Steps to Achieving Success

In addition to looking out for the obstacles above, there are some easy actions you can take to ensure your critical projects get completed.

- 1. Select the right project.** If your company is focused on projects with clearly defined benefits, employees will be more likely to support them. A few key enhancements that get done quickly are better than long, drawn-out programs.
- 2. Communicate the details.** This is simply a matter of effective delegation. Spell out exactly what you expect the team to accomplish, preferably in a scope document that contains the following:
 - Purpose. What is the current situation, and what do we want it to be when the change is completed? Make sure this is tied directly to the company's overall strategy.
 - Benefits. What will the company gain from the project? What are the costs if we do nothing? Again, connect this to the big picture.
 - Approach. What are the 5 to 10 steps required to get the project done?
 - Timetable. How long should the project take? What are the milestone dates?
 - Deliverables. What should the team produce? What should it deliver along the way to ensure the project is on track?
 - Resources. Who will lead the project? Who will work with that person? What other needs will the team have?
- 3. Follow Up.** Keeping track of the team's progress is the primary way to communicate your interest in a successful project.
 - Monitor progress at regular meetings and in between.
 - Verbally reward good performance specifically and frequently.

- Remove obstacles – political, organizational or otherwise – that prevent progress.
- Let the team know priorities. Continue to focus on deadlines.
- Reinforce the importance of the project and its benefits.
- Communicate easy, immediate changes – things you discover that can be fixed right now with no real effort.
- Require the team leader to recap assignments and due dates for team members after each meeting.

- 4. Project Closure.** Wind up properly and prepare for the next project.
 - Review anticipated results. Did the project do what it was intended?
 - Learn from mistakes. What did the team learn that could be avoided in the future?
 - Communicate the achievement to all employees.
 - Celebrate success! It's important that the team and the company take time to commemorate the accomplishment.

Get Started Today – and Benefit Tomorrow

When your company is faced with an idea for improvement, or a need for change, don't try to "aim the duck to death." Go ahead and "take the shot" by giving your project teams the tools, support and accountability they need to be successful.

More Information? If you would like to learn more about this important topic, please send an E-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our web site at www.plaidgroup.com, or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly email newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth, and increase bottom line profits. To subscribe, change your email address, or unsubscribe, please visit http://www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp

Author's Note: **Tim Smith** is a Principal with The Plaid Group. The Plaid Group helps companies simplify and stabilize their business operations to improve financial performance and gain a competitive edge. We share our FREE newsletter with you to showcase powerful tips, techniques, and ideas to help you enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth, and increase bottom line profits.