

Project Management's Role in Recovery
By Michelle LaBrosse, CEO, Cheetah Learning
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In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the recent anniversary of 9/11, we see the power of the human spirit. In the face of devastation and destruction, people still want to get things done. They want to rebuild. They want to reenergize their communities. They want to be the Project Managers of their world.

During recovery efforts, there's always a lot written about risk management. Risk management planning is critical for any organization. The breakdown is often in the execution of a risk management plan, and that's where Project Management comes in. Project Management is the "can-do" of any risk management program put into motion. It's the engine of recovery because it's the place where the strategy jumps off the paper and gets into human hearts and hands.

Many of the key tenets of Project Management are especially relevant during recovery:

1) "Living and Breathing" Project Agreements

During a disaster recovery effort, documentation has often been destroyed, but the importance of a project agreement is still critical – even if it's verbal. In a disaster think of your project agreement as "living and breathing." The more people who know it, understand it and act on it, the more life there is in it. If you are the only one who knows the plan, it will suffocate. Change becomes a minute-by-minute reality during a recovery effort, so communicating those changes to people as quickly and effectively as you can is critical. Don't be afraid of change. The only fear is silence and not communicating the immediate goals and tasks to your team.

2) Team Dynamics Under Pressure

Even in the best working conditions, team dynamics are a challenge. In crisis mode, you have the intensity of emotion. The good news is you can give people purpose and a place to funnel that emotion. Give people a clear goal that they can be committed to, give them opportunities to interact, and the opportunity to talk openly about how they're feeling and what they are experiencing. Often, just having our emotions validated releases stress. At the beginning of each day, map out a clear path of what can be done in that day. In unusual working conditions, you may need to establish new team guidelines and protocols that make sense on a disaster site, but were not relevant in your normal working environment.

3) Document the Recovery Effort. Every organization is as smart as the people it has and their collective experiences. Even if power and technology are not available initially, grab some paper and pencil and document your efforts the old-fashioned way. Keep a journal of everything that is happening, so you can share it with your team, your industry and others who may benefit from what you have learned first-hand. Experience is a powerful teacher and every thing that you learn during a recovery effort can hold important answers about prevention, as well as response.

4) Active Leadership. People need to see, hear, smell and taste success, even small victories matter. If you're in a bleak recovery effort, active leadership shows movement toward goals, positive attitude and outlook and belief that everyone's contribution matter. Communicate every success – no matter the size. Recognize people's efforts and celebrate loudly – even if it's simply a loud, rowdy cheer that says “we're all in this together and we're making progress.”

5) Give People Hope. Hope comes from active leadership. In a recovery effort, it's important to give people a safe environment where they can communicate and share their fears and concerns. Be a leader who can resolve conflict, come up with solutions and give people a way to participate in the solution. Hope ultimately comes from the actions of others that move each of us to continue on a path of recovery.

The Power of Project Management

As I've watched the news in the last few weeks, I've been struck by the power of Project Management. The art of getting things done is not only about being effective and efficient; it is also about saving lives.

Hats off to all the people working along the Gulf Coast who are rebuilding lives, homes, communities and our belief in the future. You have our thanks and admiration.

About the Author:

Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, Founder, Author of Cheetah Negotiations and Cheetah Project Management. Michelle has been designing and teaching accelerated learning programs for business since the early '90's and traditional courses since the '80's. LaBrosse holds a B.S. Aerospace Engineering, and an M.S. Mechanical Engineering. She has done extensive postgraduate work with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Educational Studies and the University of Washington Industrial Engineering Program in accelerating adult learning in corporate environments. Her research focused on using the Internet to accelerate adult learning and in determining effective adult learning strategies using accelerated learning with improvisational comedy.

In 1995 she prototyped the concept of accelerating learning using "virtual classrooms" and created online courses in business development. In the late '90s LaBrosse created and extensively tested a one-day approach to teaching Project Management while a corporate Research Scientist in Learning Techniques and Technologies for a large multinational corporation. LaBrosse has 15 years practical experience in Project Management on small to medium size projects starting with her career as an Air Force Officer and continuing through her formulation of many small business development project teams, Internet application project teams, and as a Research Scientist.

Based on her accelerated learning and Project Management experiences, Michelle created a very fast way for launching projects called Cheetah Project Management. She is the leader of the course development team at Cheetah and sets the strategic direction for the company. In her rare spare moments, Michelle enjoys spending time with her children, friends, and dogs; golfing, hiking, kayaking, traveling, skiing, classical music, Broadway shows, and throwing parties for her family and friends in Alaska, Nevada and Connecticut. She's also been known to brew a batch of beer on occasion.