Turning An Engagement Around

Idea In Short

It happens again and again that engagements get into difficulties. An imbalance quickly turns into a serious engagement crisis. What do you do in such a situation? Do you use the opportunities that arise from the crisis?

As a consultant, the moment you concretely identify an engagement crisis, you can receive the necessary legitimization and support for change. With this legitimization, you can trigger special initiate, enforce measures and change fundamental inefficiencies. In a positive sense, the engagement crisis creates the basis for a new start.

Attributes of a crisis

The main characteristics of an engagement crisis are:

- **An uncontrollable problem**: otherwise the problem-solving measures would have taken effect
- **A risk that has materialized**: the risk identified prior to the engagement during risk assessment that occurred
- **Existential threat:** a situation that endangers the entire success of the engagement and possibly even the client organization

You must clearly distinguish between risks (possible threats) and a concrete crisis (a material event that requires urgent resolution) that emerged during the engagement. This is because the effects of most crises are always existential, uncontrollable and beyond the usual / known methods of resolution. A crisis has the following attributes:

- A loss of control
- High degree of complexity
- Enormous pressure to make decisions, and

- Known crisis resolution methods and measures don't work

Accept the crisis

The first step in crisis resolution is accept that the engagement is in a crisis. Clearly and directly share this fact with the engagement team and client steering committee. Admit that you are in a crisis situation. Acknowledge that you do not yet recognize the causes and effects. Affirm that you currently have no control. Clear and transparent communications is extremely important in crisis management. Therefore, communicate the crisis to all relevant client stakeholders. Explain the effects of the crisis and their impact to enlist support from the broader team.

Have backbone and stop the engagement

Most client engagements have clearly defined scope and the crisis might not directly impact the engagement. Hence, you might want to just carry on with the engagement. However, it is important to consciously stop the engagement and appraise the client impact. Subsequently, evaluate the impact of the crisis on your engagement. Pursuing an engagement without understanding the crisis' impact on the client's business is not a good customer obsession strategy. Have the courage to stop the engagement until you have clearly understood the repercussions of the event. Communicate this to your team and client stakeholders and offer to support them through the crisis.

Change your perspective

Open yourself up to a new perspective. This also includes admitting that you need help. Surely you know the oft-quoted citation from Albert Einstein:

> You can never solve problems with the same way of thinking that created them

This is especially true in a engagement crisis. So, enlist help from specialists and subject matter experts to brainstorm and recognize new ideas to tackle the crisis. Assess what immediate actions and medium-term actions you should initiate, once you have collectively established the new direction. Assign responsibilities to the individual members of the crisis resolution team. Communicate often and closely track the developments. Meet frequently to

discuss the developments, causes and impacts. But, make sure that the meetings don't overwhelm the team members and keep them from executing the resolution activities.

Identify the cause

Often, the real cause is not the obvious and generally postulated one. So, go through all areas of the crisis and perform a root cause analysis [RCA]. Dig deeper to identify the root cause of crisis. Look at where things are stagnating. Analyze what set of issues led to the current situation. Have open and candid discussions with your client stakeholders. Abstain from engaging in client's politics, playing blame game or trying to find a scapegoat. Instead, immerse yourself in recognizing the real causes of the crisis. Try to uncover the root cause and speak out courageously! In small engagements, the root cause may be obvious. However, in large engagements, you may often have to dig much deeper. Ask yourself, for example:

- Is everyone working towards the same objective?
- Are the right people in the right places?
- What resistance is there and what are the reasons for it?
- Should you address other areas of unfeasibility?
- Is there a very formal, contract-oriented approach?
- Is there a breakdown in trust and communication?
- Are there external causes for which there is currently no solution (e.g. material bottlenecks, resource shortages, new legal requirements)?

Commitment to the engagement

The steering committee and the engagement management should be willing to find a solution to the engagement crisis. If this is not the case, terminate the engagement. Clearly state all the relevant reasons and consequences of this action. Riding a dead horse makes no business sense. Your client stakeholders should demonstrate clear commitment to turn around an engagement crisis. You need to architect a new way forward, instill new measures and change the way of working to get out of the engagement crisis. This is the first essential decision your client stakeholders should make. Subsequently, your client stakeholders should make many other decisions to get the engagement out of trouble and steer it back on the right track.

Methods don‘t help

In engagement management, people often look for methods and generic models to overcome a crisis. However, in my experience, this approach often leads to dead ends. This is because the methods and models did not prevent the engagement crisis from occurring in the first place. Furthermore, point solutions to crisis resolution may have worked in a different context. Emergent crises resolution require new approaches. Often, these approaches lie outside your client's capabilities. This is an area that consultants can demonstrate their value. First, get your client stakeholders to admit that those previous methods won't work in the new situation. Generate consensus for a different way of looking at and tackling the situation. Consider the interrelationships among issues with a new perspective. Providing a new perspective often helps overcome resistance and fears among those involved in crisis resolution.

Change things

Consultants should get the client to do things differently - in a differentiated way. Include all areas and levels of the engagement and the people involved. Includes broad and deep communications. Spend time to appraise the personal attitudes of your client stakeholders to the situation and the engagement crisis. Bringing an external mentor into the engagement to analyze the situation with fresh eyes. Help develop joint solutions with the client stakeholders to make the changes stick. The following questions can help facilitate change:

- Does the engagement leadership involve all relevant people?
- Are connections clear for everyone involved?
- Which aspects can you separate out for later implementation?
- Which requirements can smaller teams of experts or external contractors deliver?
- How can you scale new methods to meet specific needs?
- Where should changes happen to avert further risks?
- Who is the ideal person to lead the engagement?

Redefine the goal and the path

Appoint an engagement leader with right levels of decision-making authority to lead the team and the stakeholders through the engagement crisis. If required, re-define the engagement goals and sub-goals. If necessary, define new goals and set new milestones. In

addition, a shared vision on the outcome, decision framework and implementation approach will help align competing stakeholder interests. The following recommendations help here:

- Start creative problem-solving approaches. Bundle the knowledge and experience of those involved and external experts and make them quickly usable
- Address complexity step by step. Involve all participants in understanding and proceeding
- See criticism as an indication for improvement with respect and self-reflection
- Don't waste time with explanations. Just describe the past
- Appreciate successes and mistakes for continuous improvement
- Appreciate processes. Look out for solutions and accept intermediate results
- Actively manage the fears lead to formalism and stalling
- Encourage confidence among stakeholders to pursue risky tactics. Promote courageous decision-making
- Keep the focus and align the engagement towards the new goal

Awareness and self-worth

Bring experts together and only let people that are empowered to have a say and make decisions in the crisis. This will significantly help limit noise and improve focus. When looking for a way out of the crisis, only involve those people who are willing to think outside the box and who know that there is a solution, even if you haven't yet directly recognized one. People who know their own qualities and are aware of them do not dwell on questions of guilt or wanting to be right. You'll want to have a team of people who approach a problem solution together with a very high level of attention, experience and an open attitude. On the other hand, especially during crisis situations, there are teams that are stretched beyond their limits, scattered, stressed, exhausted or distracted, so that they have limited creative space for problem-solving. If you find yourself continuously repeating the problems and explanations why something doesn't work, that's a clear indication of both, one's own limitation and that of the team called upon to resolve the crisis. Here, both, collective and self-reflection are helpful.

Communicate the end of the crisis

Communicate when the crisis is over and the engagement is back on track again. There is a flip side to not communicating the end of a crisis and the effect is similar to that during pre-

crisis. Some client stakeholders require more time to accept when they have successfully resolved the crisis. This means such personnel are constantly in crisis resolution mode and that is not sustainable. Use active client engagement tactics and inform everyone involved about the new objectives, new ways to achieve those and the end of the engagement crisis. Be cognizant of the residual challenges and risks in the engagement, but those are beyond the crisis.

Recommendations

If you find yourself or your client in a crisis situation, evaluate the scenario from both, personal and corporate lenses. Consciously disregard the entrenched contexts and thinking habits. Instead, recognize the opportunities the crisis opens up. If you are handling a crisis:

- Print out the tips enumerated in this article
- Mark the tips that are applicable to you
- Write the actions or insights behind each tip that are relevant for you
- Repeat the process as a team to forge a shared vision and create common benefits

Summary

These 10 tips in a engagement crisis are intended to help you recognize the power of crisis to change and to experience it as a new scope for creativity. Last but not least, have the courage to make a fresh start. Lower all personal barriers and resistances and be ready for a fundamental change in the engagement. Realize that things are possible right now that didn't even seem possible before. Complaining doesn't help anyone and if you have to complain, do it intensively and briefly. Then, use these tips to change the course of your engagement.