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Isaac Park: A Crucible of Leadership

Gerard Seijts wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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*What a lousy start to the meeting*, Isaac Park thought as he stood in front of the partners. *Why did I ever take on this role?*

Park should have known better than to have taken on the role; there had even been a warning shot across the bow. Yesterday, when he walked into the hotel lobby to check in for his firm’s global partners meeting, one of his fellow partners had approached him and sputtered, “Now that you’re responsible for this database, I hate you already!”

Only six weeks earlier, Park had taken over the role to lead all technology operations for the firm, the centrepiece of which was a database project 18 months into its life and already significantly off track. Now, as he stood in front of 250 people and started his presentation updating the partners on the status of the new database technology, a colleague called out from the middle of the room: “I think this is all crap and we need to throw it out! Let’s bring the old system back.”

Park knew that going back to the old system was not the right thing to do. The company had already spent more than CA$20 million on the project, the old technology was obsolete, and regardless of the problems with the new technology, it was imperative that the company find a way forward and not move backward. But here he was, having to defend the project. He could feel 250 pairs of eyes boring into him as the partners awaited his response. Both his own credibility and the credibility of the project were on the line. What immediately came to his mind were the words a colleague had spoken when Park’s appointment to the role was announced a few weeks earlier: “Thank you for risking your excellent career on this dangerous, thankless, but critical task.” The words may have been said in jest, but they foreshadowed the challenge of the situation.

The Database

Park was a client partner at Primal Leadership Solutions (Primal), a global leadership advisory organization that offered consulting services and executive recruitment through 70 offices spread across 40 countries. His main job was to cultivate clients and to sell and execute projects. Six weeks before his presentation to the partners, Park had agreed to reduce his client work by 50 per cent and focus instead on implementing the new database. The project had been a challenge from the start.

The lifeblood of Primal’s business was the database. It contained the critical and comprehensive information for all of the organization’s projects—past and current—as well as its employees, clients, and recruits. The database was leveraged by the client partners, consultants, and researchers on a minute-by-minute basis; no one could do their job effectively without access to a properly functioning database. However, the legacy system comprised 26 regional systems that covered the globe like a poorly drawn Venn diagram. Information was often duplicated, inconsistent, and incomplete. For example, any recruit or client could appear in a number of those 26 databases—with one entry having a Hong Kong phone number, another a Toronto phone number, and yet another an outdated email address. The database was an embarrassment of data asset management. The legacy system had to be replaced by a single, efficient, and reliable database.

Martin Smith, Park’s colleague at Primal, had been tasked with the project of designing a new database, presumably one with better technology. The 18-month-long project required that Smith take the regional databases, one by one, and map them onto a new global database. The regional databases would be eliminated, and a single global database would remain—one that any Primal colleague, from anywhere in the world, could log in to and from which all Primal employees could access the same information in real time.

The project sounded straightforward, but about halfway through its implementation, pandemonium broke out. First, there was a problem with the technology. The new database was highly unstable; it would be on, then it would be off. Users could not count on gaining access; or, if they got in, they could not count on being able to retrieve the information they sought. Second, the database looked and felt completely different from the old system. A number of users complained that the system was not intuitively designed or user friendly. And third, the database was so slow and cumbersome to use that even those with a great deal of patience and the best intentions became excessively annoyed because response times were often so slow they rendered the database essentially unusable.

As if that were not enough, there was a fourth problem: the data itself. Combining the databases created overlaps and duplications, raising questions about the integrity of the data. For example, when the databases were combined, it was not uncommon for multiple entries of the same name to exist in the new system, leaving users to wonder which entry represented the person they were seeking.

Primal was suffering from a loss of productivity, and the partners and staff were frustrated by and anxious about the whole process, wondering if order—even the less-than-ideal former order—could be restored. And, predictably, Primal was finding it very difficult to deliver on its client work efficiently. It was, in short, a disaster.

In the midst of the chaos, Martin was asked to step aside as the leader of the technology function and Park was asked to step in. Park was not stepping in cold—he had been on the steering committee overseeing the project—and he was keen to help. He had an interest in this area and a view as to what could make it successful. Park was among those who were frustrated, particularly because his own suggestions and ideas as a member of the steering committee had fallen into a bin of ignored ideas. Martin had not been a good listener nor open to ideas other than his own. Park also stepped up because that was the culture of a consulting firm: you did client work and you contributed. Executing this project would be his contribution to the firm, and, fortunately, the project was in an area he cared about.

Reality HITS

Park knew that there was a team of about 20 people tasked with implementing the new database, supported by the broader technology team, and that he was now responsible for all of them. He did not realize, however, how beleaguered and frustrated these 20 colleagues were. The team had reached their limit, having been pushed hard to realize the project only to be met with negative feedback from every corner. They were drained and felt unpopular; they were simply not in a good place. They had followed the directions given to them and had tried to come up with solutions, but the results were not as expected. Martin had given the directions he felt made sense and had expected the team to implement these directions. When Park stepped in, he quickly concluded that some members of the team were not qualified for the work they were meant to be doing.

The challenge was daunting: how could Park swiftly fix all of this and deliver on the improvements that were needed? He knew that no matter what he did, he was now the face of the project and, as such, the target of everybody’s ire as long as the problems persisted. His colleagues at Primal knew that the project’s many problems had not started with him, but they would expect that as the new person he would fix them immediately. And if the problems were not solved quickly, the partners and staff would take out their grievances on the project leader, neglecting the fact that he had just come into the job and had double the work to do, as he had to clean up before he could “fix up.”

What made the dynamic even more challenging was the nature of a professional services firm. All partners in such a firm—250 partners in this case—were equal. They had an equal voice, and they had an equal expectation that they would each be heard. Of course, this was impossible in a practical sense, but as Park dug into what people wanted, he realized two things. First, the list of demands was so long that it would actually take years to address them in their entirety, and, second, many of the demands were mutually inconsistent.

Now, just six weeks after Park had taken over the database project, the frustrations, problems, and expectations around the project were coming to a full boil at the partners meeting. Park had come prepared to propose a path forward and expected to be given the time needed to address the problems. Being challenged with the suggestion of throwing it all out and going back to the old system was not something he had seriously considered⎯yet that was exactly the challenge he was confronted with in front of the entire group of global partners.

What should Park do to create momentum for the project?

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