

Do Not Strike Out When Setting New Product Goals

Ensuring cross functional alignment on launch goals seems like a no brainer yet it often isn't happening. Here are a couple of ideas on what to do about it.

I had the pleasure this year of coaching my daughter's 5th and 6th grade softball team in a local town league. Each girl had their own reasons for coming to the games. To our shortstop; it was critically important that the 3rd baseman knew how to dance. This way, they could practice their dance routines between batters or even occasionally between pitches. Another player, Samantha made sure our cheers were louder and more creative than the other team's.

Other girls came for the sunflower seeds or to compare notes on ponytails with their teammates. How we usually measure success (winning) was not part of their mind set. This was in evidence at the end of each game when the girls would ask, "Did we win?"

They were a young, inexperienced team playing in a "for fun" league and it was not surprising (or important) that each player had totally different goals.

During the spring, my daughter and I watched some of the country's best softball teams compete in the NCAA championships. Here each player knew the team's overall goals. They were completely aligned on how to achieve them. They had a strategy for the game and a plan for each opposing batter. They had the individual skills to execute their team's plan.

This contrast reminded me of how a lot of organizations commercialize breakthrough innovations. Many organizations lack the experience and skills to successfully launch new products, and unfortunately for them, they are not just playing for fun. One of the first symptoms of a problem occurs when there is a lack of consensus on product launch goals.

A couple of real life examples:

- A profitable, 15 year old software company planned to launch an important version of its flagship product. During a meeting with the CEO, VP of Marketing and Senior VP of Operations, just two months prior to the launch, we discussed launch goals. As the CEO began to share his thoughts on the launch, the two executives began taking notes because they were hearing the goals for the first time.

- A company that produces equipment used in a variety of manufacturing industries developed an innovative new product. An October launch is planned, yet the VP of Operations could not articulate the launch goals or what was expected of his organization.

These are successful organizations with smart people running them. However, their critical new product introductions could have been fatally flawed from the start. Ensuring cross functional alignment on launch goals seems like a no brainer yet it often isn't happening. Here are a couple of ideas on what to do about it.

- Assign a launch manager who has the responsibility to orchestrate all of the different aspects of the launch. The sales channels, operations, customer service, IT systems and even the finance groups must be ready.
- Ensure that the product launch manager has the required skills. In many technology companies, product managers are former successful engineers. They are promoted to product management based on their exceptional technical knowledge.

However, technical knowledge is only a small part of the required skill set. One of the most important characteristics of an effective product launch manager is that they successfully launched products before. It is critical to recognize the experience level of your product launch team and set realistic expectations regarding what they can do on their own. Provide them with the mentoring and assistance needed to fill their experience gaps.

- Establish and review regularly the goals for your launch. Like a well coached softball team, each part of the organization must understand how its activities contribute to the overall goals. Tracking sub-goals and dates is also critical.
- Encourage the product manager to instill a culture of discipline within the launch team, including establishing a common language for the launch. Product launch has a large number of moving parts that are only manageable if the launch team is disciplined and coordinated. Each company has its own definition of terms such as production readiness, beta customer, manufacturing release and market testing. It is the product launch manager's responsibility to ensure that the terms are used consistently and a disciplined process is followed.

If you follow these steps, it is likely that your team will be more focused on a successful new product introduction than perfecting their dance steps around third base.

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