

From the APPEL Director

The Conspiracy of Optimism, the Dangers of Pessimism

BY ED HOFFMAN



The traditional tools of project management do not help leaders with one of their most critical jobs: defining reality.

Last summer I took my son to France, and we visited the beaches of Normandy where the D-day landing took place. While we were there, I heard a story about how the day before the landing—after months of planning—General Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, wrote two letters. One was a message of inspiration that was delivered to every soldier, sailor, and airman who took part in the invasion. The second, written in the event that the invasion failed, said, “If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone.”

That’s a powerful story, and it speaks to the challenge of leading a complex project. Leadership expert Noel Tichy has said that a leader has to perform two core functions: define reality and mobilize resources. Eisenhower and the other leaders who conceived the D-day landing defined reality as they understood it and conveyed that understanding to everyone involved in the operation. As Supreme Allied Commander, Eisenhower understood how perilous the conditions would be for the troops storming the beaches and did everything in his power to provide the resources necessary to succeed. He recognized the importance of inspiring his forces and expressing appreciation for their sacrifices. His words neither sugarcoated the dangers ahead nor dwelt on them, and he made himself accountable in the event that his definition of reality or his mobilization of resources fell short.

This delicate balance between maintaining a positive outlook and remaining grounded in reality is familiar territory for leaders of complex projects. There are two traps that must be avoided.

The first is the conspiracy of optimism. Optimism that is not grounded in reality results in failure. It leads team members to hold their tongues when they should speak up, for fear of being branded the bearer of bad news. Transparently false optimism will destroy a leader’s credibility with the team.

The second trap is the danger of pessimism. A manager who conveys a sense of doom about a project’s prospects will create a negative story line for the team. Eventually that story becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Team members will believe that their project is slated for cancellation, cuts, or failure. Instead of working hard, they will begin looking for cover or the nearest exit.

The standard tools of the project manager’s trade don’t offer much guidance about how to define reality and navigate this balance. Experienced leaders know how far they can push their teams to come up with breakthrough solutions for seemingly intractable problems. They invite open discussions grounded in interpretations of hard data, and they give their teams resources and latitude to work creatively. They motivate by defining reality in terms of the mission context, sometimes using external pressures to set up an underdog dynamic. They stretch their teams without breaking them. These skills cannot be taught in a classroom or captured in a professional certificate. The ability to define reality in a way that strikes a proper balance between motivating the team and acknowledging hard truths can only be learned on the job. It is the essence of leadership. ●