

CASE STUDY:

Change Management Educates Research & Development Laboratory

The Client

A federally funded research laboratory was charged with prototyping and fabricating elements that go into defense technology. This group of literal rocket scientists needed help improving their process in order to better compete against other world actors like China and Russia and a new threat, the emerging private sector.

The Challenges

This project was unlike anything USC has ever undertaken.

The beginning of the engagement, in true USC fashion, started with the “brown paper” exercise USC is famous for. That is, everyone gets into a room, brown paper goes up on the walls and the group outlines the client’s processes, everyone’s roles and responsibilities, and a preliminary view of the gaps and opportunities that exist in the organization. The idea was to create a roadmap to guide the process forward. But the USC team was not prepared for the unique challenges they’d encounter along the way. Some specific challenges:

Shared decision-making approach within the department. The client approaches leadership in a shared manner within a fairly flat organizational structure so as not to stifle innovation. Leadership pools replace singular, hierarchical decision-makers. When the buck doesn’t stop with anyone, it’s difficult to move forward if there’s no consensus ... and there is rarely an easy consensus. This approach made it difficult for them to turn theoretical process concepts into the action it would take to fix it.

Budget allocation made interaction difficult.

Because of the nature of how projects were funded, the client team members’ hours were attributed to specific programs they were working on. Without labeling USC’s work as a funded program, only a limited number of key contacts had time to spare for USC. The project pace slowed significantly as a result.

Internal politics created a roadblock. Consultants of all stripes can come up against resistance from people in the companies we’re brought in to help. That’s nothing new. In one of the processes USC was engaged to help improve, a resident “expert” was extremely threatened by USC’s presence and spent months attempting to undermine the work USC was conducting. This person was largely unsuccessful to that end but caused USC to spend a great deal of time repairing the reputation and internal relationships developed over those months.

The facility had restricted access. Because of the classified nature of the projects, the USC team did not have the clearance necessary to have free reign of the facility as they usually do to engage employees throughout the areas of work. The team required escorts everywhere they went or



had them come to the non-classified part of the building to meet. Combined with nervousness around COVID, many of the interactions took place with people online (even though they might be in the next room).

Competition emerging as a burning platform.

Because there is a guarantee for the client not to have to compete in its industry, it became hard to create the sense of urgency that spurs the desire for change. Eventually the USC team highlighted the fact that China and Russia were big competitors of this lab because of the presumption they can make the same components quicker and cheaper than we can in the U.S. Also, the private sector continues to emerge as a big competitor as well. USC's challenge was in swaying the client's team to be willing to acknowledge these growing competitors, thus creating the "burning platform" for improving their processes and implementing a number of changes in their operation.

The target kept moving. As consultants the daily work of avoiding scope creep is ever-existent. In this case the client team was composed of highly intelligent people who were relied upon to be creative and innovative. This led to thoughts running in several directions at once. When a target area was identified, there was a lot of: "What about this? Or that? Or the other thing?" instead of focusing on one thing and checking it off the list before moving to another.

The Solution

How was it possible for the project to move forward, given all of those roadblocks? As Chris Smith, USC's Operations Manager who led the team on this project, said of many projects in general: "Tenacity through chaos."

What that meant was targeting specific areas, keeping their heads down and pushing through. Specifically:

Sticking to the facts. USC did an analysis and came up with a list of hundreds of gaps and opportunities in their process. The client had already identified many of those, but lacked the ability internally to address them. USC consolidated that list down to a workable and organized collection to take action upon. From there, they developed a roadmap that outlined what they needed to address, in priority order. The USC team outlined the resources, the costs, the people involved and the timeframe, clearly showing how it would impact their operation.

Implemented change management. It became clear to the USC team that this client needed them to be a guide through the change management process. "They needed someone to plant a flag in the ground and decide which way they were going," said Smith. It meant:

- Leading and facilitating focused and concise project management methodology
- Putting a hierarchy for decision-making in place
- Creating governance and review teams to get the right people working on the right aspects of the process at the right time through stakeholder engagement
- Defining whether they had the resources to go forward and, if not, helping the client team access the organizational decision-makers to create the business case for necessary people and equipment
- Improving communication by helping the client understand each of them wasn't an island, but part of a team

The Results

Using USC's tried-and-true processes, the team was able to convince this unique client to develop a program of change initiatives, establish the governance necessary to ensure the envisioned changes have appropriate sponsorship and support, and engage with organizational leaders to bring vision to reality. The USC team also distinguished themselves among a slew of prior consultants for this client. Other consultancies identify the problems, suggest solutions, and walk away. The USC approach has always been to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the client to make sure they are delighted and that change sticks, walking them through it, all the way.



USC CONSULTING
GROUP™

Empowering. Performance.

Contact Us:

1-800-888-8872

Email: info@usccg.com