

Leadership Barometer 138 Turn It Around in Three Months

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



I once inherited a program that was struggling and told to “turn things around in three months.” The program was a new type of disk drive that did not work, and the current team did not know why. The project had been floundering for three years in the lab.

I took on the challenge and actually did deliver a remarkable recovery in 90 days, as the team launched a product that was up to the task including all the acceptance and reliability testing.

Looking back, there were several aspects that would have been smart to consider before accepting the initial challenge. This article is about the caveats of accepting a short-term recovery challenge.

Why Did the Prior Effort Fail?

The superior was literally saying that the performance of the group under the prior leader was inadequate. The team failed to deliver a workable product. It was important to know why the prior team failed. Was it because the previous leader did a bad job, or was it for some other reason? Maybe the technology was just not there.

This is the Same Upper Leadership as the Last Try

The manager who wanted to hire me to turn things around was the same one in place when the prior leader failed. I needed to know what contribution he made to create the problems that I was supposed to “fix” in three months. Chances were pretty good that he had a lot to do with the failure of my predecessor, but he may have been oblivious to that possibility.

The Same Team is in Place

What about the team I inherited? Since the prior effort resulted in failure, there needed to be some rebuilding of the team. There were likely people among the group that were feeling like failures. Yes, a good leader can make amazing advances in the morale of

any group, but some individuals needed to be replaced because they could not recover from former abuse.

What Was So Important about Three Months?

Why was I given only three months to turn it around? Was three months just an arbitrary figure, or was there some validity to the bogey? Why didn't my new manager ask me to turn it around in a week? What was magic about three months? Was he expecting too much or too little?

Define "Turn it Around"

Finally, what does "turn it around" really mean? I needed a lot more specific goals than a hackneyed phrase if I was going to succeed. Does the boss expect me to double productivity, or was it more like just make people less frustrated at work? Are there product performance or delivery concerns? Was there a customer service issue, or perhaps there were safety issues? I could not tell what to do until I knew the specific problem

In a situation like this, the best thing to do was to pin my future manager down on answers to all five of these issues before agreeing to do the job. Accepting the challenge without understanding the above five issues was risky on my part. In this case, I inherited a fantastic group, and together we were able to pull off a "miracle recovery."

The coordination was difficult because the heads needed a new design, and they were manufactured in Taiwan. The media had problems, and it was made in San Diego. The drive hardware and testing site were in Rochester, New York.

We received the challenge to "turn it around" in September, and we were packing boxes of product for sale on New Year's Eve. The team was elated but exhausted.

Conclusion

In situations like this, it is important to forge clear objectives and ground rules before agreeing to accept a position. It would also be logical to at least have a chat with the former leader about my future manager and team before accepting the position.

This whole experience was a great learning activity for me, and I truly enjoyed the challenge. Since the team achieved a successful outcome, it was a rewarding time in my life.

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