

Alice's Analogy

Project Management

SECTION 1: WRITING THE PROBLEM STATEMENT



Deep in Wonderland. Alice has reached a bewildering intersection in the middle of the woods. She seeks technical assistance from the Cheshire Cat who is perched above her in a tree grinning.

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the cat.

“_____ so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

What is the Problem

Clearly Alice knows what she should do - - - walk. She knows she wants to get somewhere, but she has a lot of difficulty saying exactly where she wants to go. Likewise, we may believe that setting up a program, will, in due course, get us somewhere, but we find it hard to say exactly where. As soon as we shift our thinking away from clear ideas about project activities -- the things we *do*, such as training, research, etc. -- we begin to encounter a broader, more ambiguous environment that we don’t feel sure about. *If you don’t think this is true, then think for a moment how much easier it is for you to talk about the tasks you will carry out in your project than it is for you to write the goals and objectives or the problem statement for your mandate definition.*

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SECTION 2: WRITING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES



. . . all [Alice] remembers is, that they were running hand in hand, and the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep up with her: and still the Queen kept crying, "Faster! Faster!"

. . . however fast they went, they never seemed to pass anything. "I wonder if all the things move along with us?" thought poor puzzled Alice. And the Queen seemed to guess her thoughts, for she cried, "Faster! Don't try to talk!"

. . . And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, . . . they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the ground, breathless and giddy. . . .

Alice looked around her in great surprise. "Why, I do believe we've been under this tree the whole time! Everything's just as it was!"

"Of course it is," said the Queen. "What would you have it?"

What would you have it?

Most of us -- like Alice -- would like to get somewhere if we run very fast for a long time. That is, we would like to see a purpose and a goal for our activities. The clearer we are about that goal, the more likely we are to get somewhere instead of spinning our wheels or running in place. Likewise, the clearer we are about our goal, the more readily we understand what we have to do to get there. We can define objectives. Then we can begin to think of milestones to mark our progress, and pretty soon we will begin to see all of the things we can do to monitor that progress.

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SECTION 3: WRITING MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES



Alice is comparing her education with that of the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle.

The Mock Turtle is speaking:

“We had the best of educations -- in fact we went to school every day _____”

... I only took the regular course.”

“What was that?” inquired Alice.

“Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with,” the Mock Turtle replied, “and then the different branches of Arithmetic -- Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision.”

... then Drawling -- the Drawling-master was an old conger-eel that used to come once a week: he taught us

Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils.”

“What was *that* like?” said Alice.

“Well, I can't show it to you, myself.” the Mock Turtle said: “I'm too stiff. And the Gryphon never learnt it.”

“Hadn't time,” said the Gryphon: “I went to the Classical Master, though. He was an old crab, he was.”

... He taught Laughing and Grief, they used to say.”

The Regular Course

Probably none of us will ever have to prove that we are able to teach “Fainting in Coils,” but “Laughing and Grief” are not so far removed from the kind of services many project managers do for their clients.

We must learn to write measurable objectives. To do this, we must first learn to identify the conditions that will occur if an objective is being met. Next, we must make sure that we can describe these conditions so concretely that *anyone* will be able to recognize them. Finally, we must convert these conditions into measures, first for individual clients and then for the whole project. Once we have the measure, we can easily add an output level and the time period needed by the project to produce the results.

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SECTION 4: MONITORING THE PROJECT



Alice and some of the other creatures of Wonderland have gotten soaking wet. They are holding a conference to figure out how to get dry.

“What I was going to say,” said the Dodo . . . , “was that the best thing to get us dry would be a Caucus-race.”

“What is a Caucus-race?” said Alice . . .

“Why,” said the Dodo, “the best way to explain it is to do it.”

(And as you might like to try the thing yourself, some winter-day, I will tell you how the Dodo managed it.)

First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of a circle (“the exact shape doesn’t matter,” it said), and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no

“One, two, three and away!” but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out, “The race is over!” and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking, “But who won?”

This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it sat for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead . . . while the rest waited in silence.

Managing the Caucus-Race

Although it might be a silly way to get dry, some aspects of the Dodo’s caucus-race are not a great deal unlike what happens once a project is set in motion. Clients come in and go out, and the staff engages in the hard work of providing services. Everybody in motion, and it becomes difficult for the managers to keep an eye on things, much less to figure out “who won.” (By the way, if you know the objective of the Dodo’s caucus-race, you should be able to figure out who won.)

What should project managers keep an eye on? Obviously, collecting information with no purpose is a waste of project resources. In general, project managers must plan to answer the following set of questions at various points during their projects.

- How *productive* is the project?
- How do clients progress through the project *process*?
- What *resources* are needed to operate the project?
- Is the project *administered* in accordance with relevant guidelines and principles of sound management?

In order to answer these questions, managers will have to monitor their projects. They will have to request that their staffs collect certain information and put it together for them in periodic reports. Project managers will have to plan *who* will collect the information, *when* it will be collected, *where* it will be recorded, and *how* often it will be analyzed and reported.

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SECTION 5: EVALUATING THE PROJECT



Alice is being quizzed by the White Queen.

“Let’s consider your age to begin with _____ how old are you?”

“I’m seven and a half, exactly.”

“You needn’t say ‘exactly,’” the Queen remarked.

“I can believe it without that. Now I’ll give *you* something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.”

“I can’t believe *that!*” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut you eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one *can’t* believe impossible things.”

“I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Believing Things Before or After Breakfast

While we might not be in the habit of believing *impossible* things, most people do believe what they want to believe and “disregard the rest,” as Simon and Garfunkel said. For this reason, the project staff can easily believe that their project has brought about the good results that show up in the monitoring reports, while outsiders may refuse to believe that the project had anything at all to do with producing those results. They may contend that the results were produced independently of the project by something else in the environment. They may say that the project’s clients were not in need of the system.

It is important to do a post-project review. We must deal with proving -- or at least making people feel more certain -- that the project *caused* the results. We must establish that the activities of our project caused the achievement of both its objectives and its goals. The best way to accomplish this is to document the progress of the project with appropriate deliverables. Develop a work plan that defines *when* and *how* to carry out the measurements devised in section three.