

FEATURED PAPER

Ingredients to a Successful Project Team The 4Fs - Focus, Freedom, Fun and Family

By Donald A. Pillittere

How Youth Pushed Kodak into Medical Imaging

“Youth is wasted on the young.” George Bernard Shaw

Well George didn't know everything about youth - because once upon a time there was a team of young energetic individuals that developed Eastman Kodak Company's first digital medical imaging system.

Ask anyone that has worked in Health Sciences Division (HSD) about their best work experience, and all will mention their time at C Building. C Building was one of many pieces of real estate owned by Eastman Kodak Company and was so named because it had once housed Stromberg-Carlson a telecommunications equipment manufacturing company formed in 1894 as a partnership of Alfred Stromberg and Androv Carlson. Kodak was big on acronyms, and the name C Building was given to this series of interconnected brick buildings.

At the time Kodak employed well over 65,000 people in Rochester, New York that put a huge burden on office space. It was towards the late 1980s when the business unit concept was implemented at Kodak. A group of employees from sales, marketing, R&D, manufacturing, service and financing were relocated to C Building. It was the start of Kodak's entrance into digital diagnostics and those that spent a majority of their time on health imaging products were transferred into HSD.

I was a manufacturing engineer at the time working on products from the 1960s that managed to continue to serve a purpose in medical imaging. Transferring to C Building was scary and exciting at the same time since it was so far removed from the main manufacturing facility. Not long after settling in, I was asked to attend a meeting about a new imaging product – a series of products that would capture images from medical modalities (CTs, MRIs, Ultrasound etc.) and send them to a laser printer for hardcopy output.

The meeting included my supervisor, one of the project managers and other department managers. I was handed a letter that spelled out a more senior role – drive product into manufacturing as soon as possible by going “off system” - outside the current processes. That meant creating bill of materials for boards, procuring parts as they were specified, ordering tooling, and getting product built once design was reasonably stable. Others in the organization from R&D, design, marketing were hearing a similar tale, an all out assault on getting the product to market – with attendant freedom to get the job done. Going “off system” was analogous to handing the team the keys to the candy store – freedom to do what had to be done to succeed.

If you were to ask me now if our team was going to be successful, given the huge task presented to us, my answer would have been are you kidding me. I am older and have seen too many projects fail to meet deadlines. I'm more realistic and cautious nowadays. However, as one of my friends and project team members said recently, "We were young and naïve." In other words, we didn't know any better, we hadn't been jaded by past failures, we had no preconceived notions, we were part of a leading edge project and we took each problem in stride. We were chosen – which meant management had confidence in our abilities to develop their first digital diagnostic system. What a great way to start a project.

Ingredients to Success

"The 4Fs - Focus, Freedom, Fun and Family"

I surveyed some of the team members to see if they could articulate the ingredients to our success. Some of the feedback cannot be shared – since our diverse group took great pleasure in afternoon beer luncheons, bowling and everyday ball busting. However, after reading many of the comments four themes seem to surface – we had a clear focus of what needed to be done, we had the freedom (within reason) to make decisions, we had fun and we became a family. Being young and energetic just added fuel to the 4Fs. The perfect set of ingredients for a successful project.

It helped that we had smart, selfless and skilled individuals as team members. Of course our team was not perfect and there were a couple of Johnson's – you know what I mean. But we worked well with everyone and didn't bother with personalities that got in our way – we worked with them, around them, or told them to their face to get on board. When you are young thoughts tend to come out of your mouth without the brain filtering these comments. However you couldn't argue with what we were doing or how quick it was getting done and our energy and confidence were contagious.

Focus

"Design system to capture and print laser images from a GE9800 CT"

It pains me to say this about HSD's Marketing, but they understood where the market was going and provided direction for our team. Don't get me wrong, things weren't perfect and even then our team took great pleasure in giving them grief, but in retrospect, things were not too bad. We had talented individuals analyzing the market to drive our products and services that were needed for our key customer. Our key customer was the radiologist, or as we like to say...the technician who takes the images and prints the hard copies.

We had one main diagnostic device to connect to in the beginning, a GE9800 CT. There was no ambiguity with this goal. It is clear to me that part of our success can be traced to a simple, clear

end goal to launch a product that could capture images from a GE9800 CT Scanner and print them onto good old Eastman Kodak Company laser printer film. Our team had to push the envelope and break down any barriers to get to market. Units had to produce diagnostic quality images, be reliable, meet quality standards and adhere to all safety and EMI regulations. Well as complicated as the product was – the goal was equally simple. And everyone in management stayed focused on goal no matter what was happening throughout the project, we had little to no leeway.

In essence the focus on just the GE9800 scanner didn't allow our team to wander or marketing to throw in feature creep. At least this was the case for most of the project. Specifying the hardware/software architecture was less complicated because data on the output of GE9800 was available. The young engineering team even had the foresight to plan out the architecture in the beginning so that individual board design and software modules could be handed over to different individuals. Therefore each and every person managed a critical piece of the overall project – and immediately had a sense of ownership.

Even though the initial modality was GE9800 CT, marketing sold product to practically anyone willing to pay for laser printer and interfaces. The beauty of design and the initial architecture was that it was flexible enough to handle a majority of these modalities, and if we ran into a technical roadblock, our team developed another interface that could do the trick. We didn't let any challenge not even the sale of a non-existent solution get in our way. In the end, it was our focus that contributed to several follow-up ideas for which our team successfully developed a product.

Freedom

“Being empowered to make design decisions without having 47 signatures.”

Being away from the main part of Eastman Kodak gave us a sense of freedom, like children home alone while their parents are out for a dinner and movie. To some extent, management cultivated this environment. The team took this to the maximum – we stretched the limits of every process to achieve our goal. Most of the time, it was the only way to keep things rolling. We didn't need multiple signatures to change a design or purchase equipment or parts; we did it as a means to the end. We were given Card Blanche and used this freedom to make decisions that enabled us to succeed.

The freedom and flexibility extended to everything in our development process, from product architecture, parts procurement, tooling, assembly flow, factory layout and training. New technology was unknown which drove some of this, but everyone was just looking for the best way to go about business. Rarely did someone look at task using their functional glasses; in fact team members helped each other regardless of function. There were exceptions, but we just ran over these speed bumps.

During this time, layers of management were limited, which enhanced our work environment. In addition, many of these managers were also new to this technology as well. Recognizing this, these managers let us go about our business of getting the product to market. At times the challenge of developing this complicated imaging device was puzzling, however, we continued to learn and move forward. Clearly the managers played a small role in our success, but even without their backing, success was going to be ours. No one wanted to fail because we enjoyed the responsibility management provided for us to make key project decisions.

The ability to make decisions was liberating and rewarding and our confidence grew as the project progressed. This helped as the time-to-market window narrowed and technical challenges had to be quickly addressed. We just didn't think there was any challenge we could not handle and we took them all on! I personally believe that this freedom to decide was probably one of the ultimate keys to our success. We controlled our destiny and didn't have to wait for someone that had no clue about what we were doing to make a decision. Sometimes the concept of freedom conjures up images of a free-for-all. However, if every team member is focused on the goal, freedom or "empowerment" fosters ingenuity, creativity, issue resolution, resource sharing, and camaraderie. We were empowered before the concept even became common to MBA programs and corporations.

Fun

"We worked hard and played hard."

It was a pleasure to wake up in the morning and head to work; even team meetings were something to look forward to. We had a lot of fun, can you say beer, pizza, chicken wings and more beer. Yes, the team that works together and drinks together can succeed. Some team members are still in contact and remain friends more than 20 years after this experience. We didn't talk shop at lunch, just what was going on with family and life outside of work. Talking shop got you nothing but grief and maybe a slap upside your head. Many of us also started families around this time. This brought our team even closer, after all we worked for Eastman Kodak, the imaging company and could easily share pictures of our children. Not sharing pictures was almost sacrilegious.

Fun extended during office hours between individuals with practical jokes and some brutal ball busting. Many members earned nicknames that corresponded to some screw up they made during the project or doing an offsite bonding session. No one was immune to this good nature ribbing. New members to the team were quickly initiated into our club – we were an equal opportunity team. The longest nickname for a team member - Homer, Largent, La Lanne, Weber – after Homer Simpson the cartoon character, Steve Largent former Seattle Seahawk wide receiver, Jack La Lanne the Godfather of fitness, and Pete Weber the professional bowler. This engineer took it all in stride.

Major accomplishments were celebrated, which ended up being just another excuse for team members to kill brain cells. It didn't matter what was provided as part of the celebration, it was just a reason for us to become even closer as a team. We even had Conference Room L – which

was our code for the Liberty Restaurant, a favorite meeting spot for various team members. We ate there so often, the waitresses knew what we ordered for breakfast and how we liked our coffee. I think it was awhile before managers caught onto this name as team meetings at Conference Room L became a Friday morning ritual.

Family

“We had two families, one at home and one at work.”

We were young, energetic and not set in our way. We were The Justice League, each person with unique skills and experience with a common purpose. Did we fight amongst ourselves, of course, but we made up and continued to focus on the task at hand. Even though we each came from a different function our loyalty was to the project and the goal. We hadn't hardened into functional entities that only looked out for the best interest of our career and department. Throughout the project we became a supporting family, looking out for each other and always moving toward our goal. The family atmosphere was another critical piece of our success and the fond memories we had about this experience.

Our team could have easily been called “Characters R Us”:

Barry, Brainiac, an engineer who returned from Hawaii to fix a problem that had been plaguing the team for a week – in less than 2 hours. He was one of the young Turks who managed the engineers in parallel with pitching in on the design. Barry could do it all, hardware design, software design or system architecture. As big as Barry's brain was, he was an even more impressive person.

Marty, a former golden gloves boxer and bouncer, someone who repaired TVs on the side and could fix a flat tire at his house – yes this guy had a tire machine in his garage. Marty could create and fix anything; he was a jack-of-all-trades and an expert at most. He was our version of MacGyver the 80s character that could whip up anything to get out of trouble! His versatility was used by everyone, marketing, design, service and manufacturing. Marty was my go to guy and would drop anything he was working on to help you out.

Gary, we called him Doogie Howser the show about the boy prodigy, one of the team's lead production people, someone that to this day is one of my best friends. He kept things going in production and ended up being one of the most requested members by our customers and service for installing and troubleshooting new modalities. Gary was in such high demand; I spent most of my time coordinating his many request for assistance from customers, service and marketing. He was the benchmark for customer service.

There were others that made up this diverse but cohesive team that was equally gifted in both skills and character. Each of these individuals handled their functional responsibilities and more importantly contributed to the team. Joe, John, Randy, and Tom came from design, Joe another young Turk that directed the design effort. Phil, Peter, Sally, Jan, Don and Jim supported production. Toby was our key marketing person -yes we did allow the marketing people in our sandbox and everyone played well together. Lifetime bonds were formed; in fact some team

members have been going on a fishing trip for over 20 years. Stories from these fishing trips could make up a novel! The project ended up bringing us together into a family.

Conclusion

Every member of our team continues to have fond memories of their time at C Building, even after 20 years. It was a company family with complementary skills, youthful exuberance, and freedom to decide the means to the end that had a laser focus (no pun intended) on the customer. We were too young to be nervous about difficult challenges and ready to prove that management's confidence in our abilities were correct. It amazes me after being on countless projects, some quite successful and others disasters of the highest order – how those that were successful had the focus, freedom, fun and family cornerstones. Projects that failed were missing one, two, three and sometimes all four of these ingredients.

You cannot go back, but when moving forward you can take what was learned and apply it again and again. All of us in some way think back to C Building when we are on a new project and try to bring the lessons forward. They seem to be timeless, give individuals a clear task, have confidence in their ability to get the job done, allow them to have fun and provide a family atmosphere. Chances for success are greatly increased if teams are provided these raw ingredients.

I am thankful for memories of C Building; the friendships, camaraderie and success that come as part of this experience. I've come close to this feeling just once over the last 20 years and wish more opportunities are available in the future. In the meantime, I will have fun, cultivate a family environment, and hope that management provides a clear focus and the freedom for team members to decide their fate.

References:

Friends from C Building

Web Sites: Eastman Kodak Company <http://www.kodak.com>

Crawford, Merle, Di Benedetto, Anthony, *New Products Management*, McGraw-Hill, 2006

Katzenbach, Jon R. and Smith, Douglas K.: *The Wisdom of Teams*, Reprint Edition, Collins, 2003.

Leavitt, Harold J. and Lipman-Blumen, Jean: "Hot Groups", *Harvard Business Review*, Reprint Number 95405, July-August 1995.

About the Author:**Donald A. Pillittere**

Donald Pillittere is currently a Project Manager with Axxcelera Broadband Wireless, a leading provider of solutions and services for the global broadband wireless market, where he manages operational activities related to the manufacture and deployment of a portfolio of WiMax compliant broadband wireless products. Consulting with engineers around the world, he also manages supplier relationships and reviews manufacturing materials and processes to ensure compliance with European RoHS/WEEE directives. Mr. Pillittere has consulted on a wide range of projects including the launch of a new CD-authoring product and the redesign of a factory site. As Worldwide Product Manager for the Eastman Kodak Company's Professional Division until 2004, Mr. Pillittere managed the development and introduction of numerous award-winning products that exceeded sales projections and profitability goals. With Kodak, he also held positions in the Health Sciences Division and with Kodak Health Imaging Systems, Inc. Mr. Pillittere has taught graduate courses in Operations Management, Manufacturing Strategy & Tactics, Managing Manufacturing Resources, and Supply Chain Management as an Adjunct Professor in the College of Business at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) since 1999. He has a Bachelor of Science degree from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo in Electrical Engineering; and an MBA from RIT in the USA. He can be contacted at dpillit1@rochester.rr.com.