CHAPTER 23

GETTING PROMOTED WHETHER YOUR PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL OR UNSUCCESSFUL

During your engineering career you will encounter many so-called "truths" (actually fallacies) about engineering. If you blindly accept these so-called truths you will be severely limiting your career. One of these so-called truths is the belief "you can't get promoted if your project is unsuccessful." The fact of the matter is that most promotions are the result of outstanding performance during an unsuccessful project. The reason is that during an unsuccessful project there is usually quite a bit of upper management visibility. This extra visibility provides a unique opportunity for the engineer to demonstrate his or her capabilities to solve problems and show readiness for promotion. All the ingredients are there for a quicker promotion with outstanding performance and this extra visibility. Unfortunately, the converse is also true—all the ingredients are right for a quicker demotion if your performance is poor.

Another common fallacy is that most engineering projects are successful. The fact of the matter is, engineering projects are not all successful. Therefore, you stand a very good chance of spending most of your career working on unsuccessful projects. Another fallacy is that a successful project automatically results in a promotion.

If you blindly accept these fallacies, you have set yourself up for a very unsuccessful career. To overcome these fallacies and maintain career development you must develop talents or skills that lead to career development—regardless of whether or not your project is a success. If the project you are working on turns out to be unsuccessful, the question then becomes "How do I best survive and end up with a promotion?" If the project is a success the

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question becomes "How do I best capitalize on the results to increase my chances for getting a promotion?" The specific actions you take depend upon whether or not the project will be judged as successful or unsuccessful. In this chapter, we will identify specific actions you should take when the project is unsuccessful and another set of actions when the project is successful.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Successful engineers learn how to make their promotion independent of the outcomes of their projects.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to determine whether or not a project is successful or unsuccessful. What one supervisor considers successful, another might consider unsuccessful. The first step is to determine if the project you are working on is heading for success or setbacks. To best do this let us identify some common indicators that will help you judge.

HOW TO DETERMINE IF YOUR PROJECT IS A SUCCESS OR NOT

One indicator that is always good to check on is your supervisor's opinion of how the project is going. When you have a few minutes alone simply ask how the project you are working on is going. Listen carefully to the answer; it will tell you a lot. If your supervisor responds positively then this is a good indication that things are moving along quite well. Try and get them to identify the specific things they see as significant. This information is very valuable and you may be able to capitalize on it later.

If your supervisor responds negatively to the progress or results of the project, this is a good indication that the project is not turning out as planned. In this case, ask what is going wrong and what should be done. Try and get them to identify the specific actions they think you should take to turn things around; this is very valuable information.

Another indicator is the project technical results. Is the project or design meeting the requirements or is it failing tests? Compare the test results to the original requirements and performance model. Are the actual test results coming close to the results expected or are they significantly off? Check the results in other areas of the project. Your area may be successful but if another area is failing miserably it could make the entire project unsuccessful. For example, a new car body design might look great, but there may be severe problems with the motor and braking system that can cause it to fail. If you are only working on the body design, you may not be aware of the setbacks in other departments that are hurting the overall success of the project. Overall test results are good indicators of a project's success.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** The actions you take for your career depend upon whether the project is headed for success or a setback.

Check the schedule for the project. Is the project progressing as planned? Is it ahead of schedule or behind? Being behind schedule indicates problems. Another indicator is cost. Are the costs running as planned or is the project overrun? Overrun projects are bad news and often get the president of the company's attention since they eat up profits.

Check the follow-up plans for the project. Is the project going to transition into the next phase? Is funding available to continue the effort next year? If so, chances are the project is getting the results expected and it will be considered a success. If not, you may be working on a dead-end project. Management may intend to end the project since the results everyone hoped for are not happening. By knowing the follow-up plans you can get a good indication of whether the project is considered successful or unsuccessful.

How are management reviews of the project going? If they are smooth and you don't hear much, then it is a good indication that the project is successfully progressing. If the management reviews result in more meetings and sudden changes in the direction of the project, then it is a good indication that the project is headed for trouble.

Another good indicator of project success is the customer's reaction. Does the customer seem pleased with the results to date?

The health or success of a project will change from day to day and week to week. As the project proceeds, unexpected problems will arise from time to time. Hopefully, they will all be solved. Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether a project will be successful on any given day. In order to get a good indication of how successful the project will be, you must constantly monitor all aspects continually throughout the project. Only by doing this will you get a good sense of whether the project is going to be judged a success or not.

CAREER ACTIONS IF THE PROJECT IS UNSUCCESSFUL AND HAVING SETBACKS

If the project you are working on is headed in the wrong direction you must take actions to minimize the damage to your career. These actions will be in response to the two most common questions asked by management when a project is headed for setbacks. These questions are: Is the project unsuccessful because the wrong people are assigned to it or are the people working on it the right and best qualified? If the answer is no, then the next logical question becomes: Is the project unsuccessful because the technical problems are insurmountable? As management searches for the answer to these questions you must be prepared to take action to minimize the damage to your career and hopefully use the opportunity to advance your career.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Unsuccessful projects require you to go into a high-energy state.

Your first response to an unsuccessful project should be to go into a high-energy and high-output state. This means making your efforts visible to management to show how hard you are working on the problem. These visible efforts include working extra hours, being organized, making excellent technical presentations on the problems, identifying solutions, and projecting an "always willing to try" attitude. Let's explore some specific actions you can do for each of these efforts.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Make sure your boss knows what you are doing!

The more time you put in, the better you look and the more you benefit. However, if you put in extra time and your supervisor doesn't know, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. It is a good thing to first approach your supervisor and ask about working overtime to help out. At the end of the week it is a good idea to stop by his office and let him know what you accomplished and how much overtime you worked. If you plan on working over the weekend, it helps to point this out also.

When you are working late at the office and you have voice mail or electronic mail, it's a good idea to leave your supervisor a message just before you go home. Both voice mail and electronic mail have a time stamp indicating the time you sent the message. It will impress the supervisor when she reads your message or progress report the next day and it indicates when you sent your message. Also, a message sent on the weekend can bring others up to speed on Monday morning and highlight how much effort you are putting in. The next thing you must do is get organized. This may be hard to do when things are falling apart all around you, but you must! Remember, management is constantly asking "is the project unsuccessful because of the people assigned to it?" If you are presenting an image of being organized, management will probably walk away saying "thank goodness we have them on the project—if anyone can turn this around it will be them!" These types of statements ultimately add to results in career growth and promotions.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Successful engineers learn how to make their efforts and the efforts of other team members visible to management.

Now the question becomes one of how can you show that you are organized? It is simple, the first thing to do is generate a plan. What tasks are you going to be doing to solve the problem? What is the schedule for accomplishing the tasks and what results do you expect? The best way to communicate this to management is through a written plan documenting your intentions. By writing up a plan and giving it to management you are accomplishing two things. First, you are showing them you are organized and second, you are

providing them with a "get well plan" they can share with the supervisors. If the plan is good, upper-level management will get the impression that your supervisor has assigned the right person to solve the problem, making them and you look good.

First, you must complete a thorough technical analysis. Second, identify the specific technical problems that must be overcome. Third, identify potential solutions to the problems. Determine the good and bad points of each solution. Fourth, rank the solutions and finally present a recommended approach. The worst thing you can do is present all the problems to upper-level management with no solutions. An engineer is paid to understand the problems, get help from coworkers, and identify solutions. Do your job if you expect to be promoted. Even a project that is considered to be unsuccessful will be looked upon as a success if you can explain exactly what went wrong and how to fix it.

There are two conditions for success as far as your career is concerned.

1. The project accomplished its goals and was successful.
2. The project encountered problems and setbacks, but we know exactly what went wrong and how to fix it next time.

In either case, the project results should be good for your career. There is only one condition for being unsuccessful: The project was unsuccessful and no one knows why.

When a project is heading for trouble there are often a series of meetings with management to ensure that everything possible is being done to make the project successful. If you are invited to one of these meetings never go unprepared. Make sure you have a well-organized and thorough report. We have already discussed the three major things you must bring to all the meetings: a plan, potential solutions, and good technical analysis. A well-organized and neatly prepared handout summarizing all three areas will be appreciated.

Management meetings will be tough and very stressful. It is important you be well prepared and have thought through your ideas. Your plan should identify key tasks and dates. It should show a logical sequence of events that you plan on following. Take the time to explain the importance of each task and how the task will contribute to the solution. Make sure the plan is realistic and can be accomplished within the time you have budgeted and with the resources available. If you need more time or resources, then identify the need.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Let management catch you at your best, not your worst when things are failing.

The technical part of your presentation should describe the problems. It must be exact and any analysis presented must be correct. Use graphs and math

FIGURE 23-1 Having a plan and positive attitude are key.

modeling supported by any test results you have obtained. Compare modeling results to test results as much as you can. A thorough review of test results is always looked upon very favorably.

Remember your objective is to demonstrate that you have the technical knowledge necessary to successfully solve the problems and you are the right person for the job. Bring photos of anything that will help you illustrate the problem. The optimum career move is to bring the managers down to the lab and let them see, handle, or run whatever it is you are working on. People are more sympathetic when they see firsthand how difficult the problem is and will naturally become involved.

The attitude that you project at review meetings and during discussions with your coworkers also affects career development. The project may be unsuccessful in the end, but with a good attitude you can minimize the damage that can be done to your career (Figure 23-1). What you would like to hear your supervisor say at completion of the project is "The project was unsuccessful but you had such a good attitude that I want you on my team again!"

I strongly recommend not taking things personally and do not fight nor blame during meetings. This may be hard to do as people start to criticize your plans. You need a calm and level-headed approach when everyone else around you may be losing their composure. Rather than arguing with them, spend the time and energy in drawing out their ideas on how to make improvements. This will get their ownership in the plan and they will be less likely to blame you when their ideas don't work either.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

This attitude is one of always looking for solutions and volunteering help. Supervisors usually welcome someone willing to take on more work or try out something new after hours. Be willing to try out new ideas even though they are not yours. Often someone else will have a potential idea and need you to try it. Be willing to give it a try even though you may not agree with it.

Sometimes just following orders can benefit your career more than you realize.

Stay away from any negative statements. Being Ms. or Mr. Doom and Gloom does not help the team and may even contribute more to the setbacks and problems of the project. Some of the doom and gloom statements that indicate to management that they have the wrong people on the team are:

That will never work because. . ..
There is nothing we can do. . ..
It's impossible. . ..
No sense trying, the project will not be successful because. . ..
Why won't it work? (As compared to: What will work?)
It's not my idea. No way am I. . ..
It's not my fault, it's their fault for. . ..
It's not my department that. . ..

Some of the good attitude statements that reinforce management's conviction that they have the best person on the job are:

I'd be willing to try that because. . ..
The good points of the solution are. . . ?
I think I might be able to make it work if we. . ..
I'd be happy to put in extra hours to see if it works.
How can I help the team out?
What are the good points of the. . . ?
It doesn't matter who caused the problem, we must. . ..
Just tell me what I can do, I want to help with. . ..

The reason that attitude is so important is that most managers have worked on projects that have been unsuccessful. They realize that tough times require a positive attitude. It is the person who keeps on going who will eventually succeed and attitude has a lot to do with it. Besides, all projects come to an end and there will be the next project to work on. Supervisors will make assignments for the next project based on the performance demonstrated on the last project. Who do you think they will choose—a person who projects doom and gloom or one who has a positive attitude and is willing to work through problems? Who do you think they are going to promote regardless of how the project turns out?

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Having a positive attitude when setbacks occur isolates your career from unsuccessful projects.

At the end of an unsuccessful project one good action is to document the lessons learned. This may take the form of writing a simple memo that

documents all the good and bad lessons learned during the project. Volunteering to write this memo is good for several reasons. First, management looks on this activity very favorably since it helps share with other groups those things that worked so that they can capitalize on them and avoid those things that did not work. Second, after you have written several of these memos you will have acquired an excellent library of things to do and not do on a project. This knowledge is power for future projects.

Finally, do not fix blame on any one individual; it was a team effort and everyone was unsuccessful together. The best thing you can do is learn from your mistakes and move on. Most people can handle success, but the *really* successful people in life are those who can learn to handle setbacks and problems only to overcome obstacles and turn an unsuccessful project into a success.

ACTIONS TO BENEFIT YOUR CAREER IF THE PROJECT IS A SUCCESS

The discussion thus far has focused on what to do if the project you are working on is experiencing setbacks and looking unsuccessful. Now let's look at what to do if the project you are working on is headed for success.

Most people believe that project success guarantees a promotion. This could not be further from the truth. Project success does not guarantee a promotion, but it does help. The reason that success does not guarantee a promotion is due to the fact that management often devote their time and energy to projects that are in trouble. Another common response by management is "Why should I promote you for a successful project? That's what you get paid to do. You are just doing the job I hired you to do in the first place. If it weren't a success you wouldn't be doing your job. We don't give promotions for just doing your job. You must, therefore, take actions that maximize the benefits from working on a successful project.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Successful projects require you to go into a high-energy state.

As with unsuccessful projects, your response to a successful project should be to go into a high-energy and high-output state. This means simply making your efforts visible to management to show the excellent results you are obtaining. Again, these visible efforts include working extra hours, getting organized, making excellent technical presentations on the great results, identifying benefits, and projecting an attitude of success.

Do all these actions sound familiar? They should because they are the same actions you would be taking for a project that is unsuccessful, but with a different twist on them. Let's explore some specific actions you can take for a successful project.

The more time you put in, the better you look and the more benefit gained. If you put in extra time and your supervisor does not know about it,

or they do not know how well things are going, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. At the end of the week, it is a good idea to stop by their office and let them know how much overtime you worked and the exciting results you obtained. Again, the same efforts an unsuccessful project required.

The next thing you must do is get organized. The question is, how can you show that you are organized? Again, it's simple. The first thing to do is generate a report showing all the good results, highlighting the things that went well. Compare modeling results to test results, show how the results met or exceeded plans. By writing up the results and giving them to your supervisor you are accomplishing two things. First, you are showing that you are organized and second, you are providing a "Good News Report" that can be shared with other supervisors. Upper-level management will get the impression that your supervisor has assigned the right person to the job, making your supervisor and you look good.

Oftentimes when a project is successful, management feels no need to review progress. In this case, you call the meeting. Make sure you have a well-organized and thorough report. The report should summarize the plan followed, any technical analysis, test results, and a benefits summary. A well-organized and neatly prepared handout summarizing all three areas will be appreciated.

The technical part of your presentation should describe the problems you solved. It must be exact and any analysis presented must be correct. Use graphs and math modeling supported by any test results you have obtained. Compare modeling results to test results as much as you can. A thorough review of test results is always looked upon very favorably. Remember, your objective is to demonstrate that you have the technical knowledge that contributed to the success of the project and you are the right person for the job.

Bring photos of anything that will help you show the success. The optimum career move is to bring the managers down to the lab and let them see, handle, or run whatever it is you are working on. People are more likely to appreciate the trouble you went through and the magnitude of the success when they see them first-hand.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** When reporting the project's success to management, report it in terms of "our" and "the team's" success, rather than "I."

The attitude you project at review meetings and during discussions with your coworkers is also important to career development. Make sure you give credit for success and report things in terms of "we" and not "I." The reason this attitude is so important is that most managers have worked on projects that were successful. They realize it required a team effort and no one individual did it all. Supervisors will make arrangements for the next project based on the performance demonstrated on the last project. Who do you think they will

choose—a person who takes all the credit or one who is a good team player and willing to share the credit? Who do you think they are going to promote?

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Spread the credit for success around as much as possible.

If you are a team leader for the project there are several additional things you can do to help the team capitalize on the results. First, you can nominate the team for a company award. Or you might try to get an article published in the company newspaper. Make sure you get the team members' names in the article. Another good thing to do is take a team photo and pass out copies to the team members.

Photographs of the hardware or the test results are always a good thing to give your supervisor to show others or put them on an office wall. If your supervisor hesitates to do anything, you might point out the benefits received when it becomes known that they were responsible for assembling the team.

▶ ***Career Tip.*** Go all out to get the team rewards; it will pay dividends for years to come.

If it is possible, you may want to publicize the good results outside the company. Writing a paper and submitting it for publication or presentation at a symposium is an excellent idea. This gets your name known throughout the industry rather than just throughout the company.

At the end of a successful project, it is again a good idea to document the lessons learned. This may take the form of writing a simple memo that documents all the good and bad lessons learned during the project. Volunteering to write this memo is good for several reasons. First, management looks on this activity very favorably since it helps them share your work with other groups so that they can capitalize on it and avoid those mistakes and setbacks. Second, after you have written several of these memos you will now have acquired an excellent library of things to do and not do on a project. This knowledge is power for future projects.

SUMMARY

The so-called "truths" that you encounter in your engineering career should not be accepted at face value because they limit your career growth. This is especially true of the fallacies that successful projects always result in promotions and projects that are unsuccessful will limit or damage your career. There are actions you can take to ensure that your career continues to grow regardless of the outcome of the project. Hopefully, you have realized that the actions are similar for the successful project and the unsuccessful project.

For an unsuccessful project, you need to put in extra effort, get organized, develop a recovery plan, brief management, and identify the reasons for setbacks. For a successful plan, you also need to put in extra effort, organize the good results, brief management, and identify the reasons for the success. In either case you will be operating in a high-energy state and with positive attitude, giving credit where credit is due and not fixing blame. Excellent technical presentations showing theory, modeling, and test results, are musts following both unsuccessful and successful projects.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. If you are working on a major project, determine if management considers the results to date to be successful or unsuccessful.
2. When can you be sure the project is successful or unsuccessful?
3. If it is successful, what should you be doing?
4. Name three ways to share the success.
5. If it is unsuccessful, what should you be doing?
6. Can you name any other fallacies that might be limiting your career that you are not even aware of? For example:

   No raises or promotions are given in bad economic times!
   They won't promote me because I'm. . . .
   They never have before!

(Hint: Fallacies are usually great sounding reasons that put blame on some abstract or uncontrollable circumstance.)