

Project Downsizing – Part 2: Execution

A Case Study by R. Max Wideman

In Part 1 of this case study, we described the planning of a very personal project involving "downsizing". According to Wikipedia,¹ amongst other interpretations: "Downsizing is being regarded by management as one of the preferred routes to turning around declining organizations, cutting costs, and improving organizational performance."² That sounds like a good description of this project as a case in point.

Editor's Note: This paper is a record of an actual project presented for use as a general project management class exercise. For this reason, specific names of companies or individuals have been carefully omitted. However, anyone wishing further information may contact the author through the contact information provided on this web site.

Project execution – Work Packages 1 & 2

The execution of the various tasks in the Master Plan went quite smoothly, but there is no question that the pressure was on. To achieve them we canceled all other engagements and activities and gave our full attention to the project. You might think that six months was a generous allocation of time but in spite of our attempts to "get ahead of schedule" we were still faced with a "high productivity" period surrounding the final move. Because we were aware of this and that, once set, the move date was absolute, we scheduled the bulk of the activities to be conducted over the first five months leaving nearly a month of "float". It was as well that we did.

Work package #1

This consisted of listing all of our belongings and deciding their disposition. It was one thing to mark each item accordingly on paper, quite another to recognize which was what when looking at the item itself. Initially, this gave rise to a lot of unnecessary repetitive decision-making. Therefore, we resorted to marking – but how? Office bullet markers of various kinds refused to stay stuck. Finally we resorted to cutting up colored electrical tape as small flags. This worked very well, in fact, too well on furniture, as it tended to peel off the varnish. Nevertheless, this exercise was invaluable when it came to physically moving furniture. As a result of this strategy, we were still finding flags on items, weeks after we had moved in.

Some furniture items we thought had value so we took those to dealers who offered to sell the items on our behalf for a percentage of what ever they sold for. This got rid of some stuff but so far we have not seen any return. Other items we posted on Craig's list.³ Workshop tools proved a hot item, general household items moved slowly and gardening tools were a wash out. We were happy for our neighbors to help themselves. Beds and mattresses, for various health reasons, are particularly difficult to dispose of.

Work package #2

Coordinating our team members-under-contract probably gave rise to the most risks. However, being very specific on our requirements, what was to be done and when we wanted it done, helped considerably. Arranging services at the SILC (senior's independent living community) residence, such as regular telephone and TV, as well as high-speed Internet and cheap-rate international telephone calling,

presented no difficulty.

Shipping furniture to San Diego and to Toronto proved to be problematic. The cost and hassle of crossing the border to a US destination was simply prohibitive and so was abandoned. Shipping to Toronto followed the normal path of making inquiries of various moving companies; making a selection; obtaining an estimate for a given inventory and signing up; preparing goods for shipment; and ensuring that they arrived safely at the other end. And, of course, paying the bill. This last proved something of a shock, as without any change in inventory shipped, the actual charge was substantially higher than estimated. We have theories about this, of which we plan to write separately.

We knew that we would need help with disposing of a lot of stuff, particularly with "a final clearance". For this we solicited the help of a young lady starting her own business as a professional organizer and certified home stager. At a very modest cost, she successfully found homes for all remaining stuff after we had taken first pickings. Her added advantage was that she was already familiar with SILC and helped us to understand what to expect on arrival.

Project Execution – Work Packages 3 to 5

Work package #3

Three months into the project we received a call from the management of SILC to say they had something to offer. With great expectation we went over to inspect. However, the two adjacent suites did not really lend themselves to being combined so we turned the option down. Another month went by while we became increasingly anxious. However, at the end of that time we received another call to say that two suites ideally suited for our purposes were now coming available.

And indeed they were, so we readily accepted. Actual possession would be another month out because some renovation was needed such as new carpeting. However, the management was willing to undertake our request for the connecting archway between the suites at the same time during this period rather than wait until we took possession. This suited our schedule exactly so we were well pleased.

Measuring up the suites at SILC and arranging the ½ inch-to-a-foot cut outs on our carefully plotted plans to the same scale of course, was the fun part. We found that with careful maneuvering we could fit in a good selection of our furniture. Other items like tables and shelving we chose to modify. A significant extra bonus for us was that one of the suites had a small washer-&-drier room that we chose to use as a storeroom.

For this we made a set of full-height, self-supporting shelving seven-foot long. Getting the pieces into the elevator and into the suite, assembling the pieces in the storage room (too high to go through the door) and then into place was something of a challenge. However, our neighbor came to the rescue and our careful measurements paid off.

The main room in one of the suites we used as an "office", i.e. for our filing cabinet, computers, printer and other happy toys. We work on separate computer platforms (Mac and PC) so that requires separate workstations with plenty of working table space. These all needed customizing to fit the available space, taking many days of woodworking activity in the workshop. When done, these were assembled in our old "office" as "proof of concept". This exercise would also signal the end of my woodworking hobby days.

Work package #4

Selling our house did not quite go as planned. Just before the planned date for the start of our selling process there had been a flurry of activity in our area. An old house just down the road went up for sale. It was an "estate sale" and in our current market, the house really only suitable for demolition. The property attracted a lot of attention and numerous concurrent offers. Our agent, who happened to be also handling this sale, put out a notice calling for final offers by a deadline date. The estate executors were then able to select from the best offer. As a result, the property was sold for an unprecedented sum.

This appeared all very encouraging. At the same time it made us nervous because we felt that such a hot market could not last. Therefore, we made sure that we started our selling process as early as possible in our schedule and hoped for several concurrent offers against an asking price factored on the house down the road. But all this was not to be.

There was plenty of interest at two open houses that we held, but the market did indeed "cool down". In the event we received a couple of offers in succession, both of which fell through over difficulty in obtaining mortgages. The banks had simply taken note of a deteriorating economic climate and tightened their lending requirements. In response we lowered our expectations (i.e. our asking price) and the house eventually sold on the fourth offer. Fortunately for us, the buyer wanted a quick sale and the closing of the sale and transfer of the property took place dead on schedule as we had planned four months earlier.

Although dreaded for months, moving out was actually a breeze. At our son's suggestion we had purchased a large number of standard one cubic foot cardboard packing boxes⁴ that replaced most of the much larger boxes supplied by the moving contractor. We used our family room as a staging area where we assembled the packed boxes as well as other articles destined for different locations.

Work package #5

The "everything else" tasks all went smoothly and generally as planned. Nevertheless, these tasks were time consuming and often tedious. But finally they all got done as time became available.

Final phase

This case study would not be complete without a brief discussion of the actual move, how the results stacked up against our Key Success Indicators (KSI), the actual risks experienced, and any lessons learned.

The Move

Our son and daughter joined us in the house for a week or so over the actual transition period and helped with packing and unpacking. On the actual moving day, everyone knew what to do because everything was marked and where applicable laid out on the scaled floor plans of our suites at SILC – and everything actually fitted. Subsequent re-assembly of our rather elaborate electronics equipment took several days, but otherwise went without a hitch.

After our move into SILC, our son and daughter remained in the house and went through it, generally

cleaning up and touching up damaged walls and the like to leave the house in ship shape condition. As soon as they left, our professional home stager arranged final clearance of all remaining belongings so that the house was left completely cleared ready for final closing of the house sale.

Key Success Indicator compliance

- KSI #3 – Project success: Remarkably, the whole relocation adventure went according to plan, and met our ultimate time objectives.
- KSI #2 – Financial success: As is common amongst most projects, costs were somewhat higher than originally budgeted but not "out-of-reach". The redeeming feature was that although we lowered the asking price on our house, which we had felt was very optimistic anyway, what we received was still comfortably above what we needed to make the project viable in terms of future cash flow. And all this in spite of serious concerns over the US economy that inevitably affects the Canadian economy.
- KSI #1 – Product satisfaction: The accommodation worked out exactly as planned, the SILC management bent over backwards to help us in the endeavor, and we were able to settle in just as we expected. Being at SILC means living in a wonderful setting surrounding its own private gardens, enjoying excellent everything-included staff service, and making a lot of new friends.

In this last KSI, we are somewhat cautious. In the last analysis, the success of every project hinges on "customer satisfaction" with the "product". And because every project is about "change", it takes time for customers, notably the "users", to become comfortable with the new working environment. People working in the computer software industry, or working with software for instance, will be particularly familiar with this phenomenon. And this project is no exception.

But the question is: How long after the delivery of the product should one make the assessment of "satisfaction"? Since this duration obviously varies from project to project, the best rule-of-thumb is to take the pre-assessment period as the same length of time that it took to conduct the project in the first place. In this case study, it means six months.

Post-project Review

Risk events

Almost all of the risks and issues identified in our original Business Case (see Part 1 of this Case Study) either did not arise or were mitigated as planned. For example, we ran out of time trying to dispose of belongings that we thought had value. We decided to cut off this activity and leave the remainder for disposal by our professional home stager. This proved an advantage because it made some packages of articles more attractive and hence were taken away at no cost.

In another case, as the planning got more detailed, we saw opportunities to modify some items of furniture so that we could squeeze in more than originally contemplated. Such work was undertaken at the expense of our final month contingency time. Other examples have already been described in the foregoing text.

But all projects involve a large number of decisions, some of which result from, or lead to, significant surprises⁵ and this project was no exception. The selection of what to take versus what to reject relating to a large number of personal items, especially when they are shrouded in memories, gives rise to a lot

of very personal stress. This is further amplified when it has to be done under pressure of a deadline. This stress had a significant and unexpected affect on our health.

As described earlier, we tried to mitigate this by holding on to our house and many of its contents until after our move to SILC. This way, as we better understood our needs in our new home, we would still have the opportunity to pick up some items we had previously rejected, while returning others not needed for final disposal. Only a very few items we found necessary to juggle in this way.

Lessons learned

For a case study, this "pack-up-and-go" project may represent a lot of hard work and, in some cases, personal anguish; it is, nevertheless, reasonably straight forward. However, it is clear to us that without applying many of the basic tenets of project management, there are many places that it could have fallen off the rails.

For example, after the move to SILC, we found that we had not considered the difficulty of finding medical treatment facilities closer at hand to our new location. Nor did we expect to suffer a mail strike just as we were trying to advise all and sundry of our change of address and telephone number, itself a significant task.

We have also learned that adapting to a new and very different living environment is not accomplished over night. Indeed, as we described earlier in connection with KSI #1, it could be as long as six months. For this reason it is still too early to make a final qualitative assessment of success, in terms of satisfaction.

But again, as with most projects, there are typically over arching circumstances that influence the perception of the outcome. In this case, what other choice did we really have? Delaying the move would only have increased the anguish. Getting old is an undesirable but unavoidable fact of life and it is better to accept the fact and get on with it.

R. Max Wideman

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downsizing>

² Mellahi, K. and Wilkinson, A. (2004) Downsizing and Innovation Output: A Review of Literature and Research Propositions, BAM Paper 2004, British Academy of Management.

³ Craig's List: <http://vancouver.en.craigslist.ca/>

⁴ Actual box sizes were 1.25 and 1.5 cu. ft. The essential features were that they all had the same footprint. That meant that they could be easily carried, even by us, and stacked ready for shipping to various destinations.

⁵ That is, "unexpected risk events".

Appendix

Project Downsizing – Case Study Review Questions By R. Max Wideman

Editor's Note: The purpose of project management is to achieve a successful project and all that this implies. Therefore, the purpose of these questions is to assist in unearthing lessons learned about managing a project from this general type of real-life example. The questions are intended to suggest issues for discussion, so the responses will largely be matters of opinion, depending on the respondent's situation and/or experience. While this may be discouraging for schoolbook learners expecting right or wrong answers in "check-the-box" type answers, this condition reflects the real world of project management uncertainty and is quite appropriate.

Issues for Discussion

Project Concept and Strategy

1. What was the motivation for this project? Write a simple Business Case in one paragraph.
2. Establish a short list of Key Success Indicators for this project. What use would that be?
3. Was this project well conceived?

Project Scope

4. What is the difference between project scope and product scope? Explain how your ideas apply to this project?
5. Develop a scope statement from the case study information provided. What might you have done differently and why?
6. What project management tools, if any, were used to ensure the desired outcome? What would you recommend?

Project Quality

7. Is there a difference between "Project Quality" and "Product quality", if so what?
8. Is either an issue in this type of project? How were they tackled, and what would you have done?
9. What do you think were the quality grade expectations in either case, either described or implied? Were they achieved?

Project Planning

10. What was the basis of the project planning? Identify and assign suitable labels to the various phases and/or stages if any and justify your selection.
11. Could the project life span have been improved?
12. Develop an appropriate breakdown structure. What would you call it?

Time

13. What was the original duration of the project life span? How was it arrived at?
14. Was it changed and, if so, for what reason? Did that make sense?
15. Draw up a bar chart of the activities described in the case study and show their dependencies. Show critical decision points, i.e. key milestones.

Cost

16. Develop a high-level cost estimate, i.e. the major project costs, by "guesstimation".
17. How should this estimate be presented?
18. What were the real cost considerations on this project? Were these a part of the project's management?

Risk

19. What were the main risks on this project?
20. What were the contingency plans in each case, if any?
21. Were there unexpected risk events? If so describe and state if they should have been expected.

People

22. Who were the stakeholders identified in the case study?
23. Who was really in charge? Explain.
24. Draw up your own list of reported and potential stakeholders and categorize them into groups?

Procurement

25. Was "procurement" involved in this project? If so, what specific activities fell into this particular project management knowledge area?
26. How well were these specific activities handled?
27. What would you have done and give your reasons?

Information/Communications

28. What recommendations would you make about how communications should be conducted on a project of this size?
29. Were there any changes in the project? Develop a suitable process flow diagram for this particular project.
30. Describe any lessons learned.