

How Your Firm Can Iterate for Optimal Communication and Responsive Decision-Making

Written by: Ed Muzio, Chief Executive Officer, Group Harmonics

Construction requires planning. Learning as you go is a fine idea in theory, but you can't exactly upgrade light fixtures over the internet or revise floor plans on the fly. In our world, "corrections and adjustments" may take months and cost millions. If you can't lay out a strong plan and follow it closely, you are doomed to cost overruns and schedule slips.

And yet, construction also requires adaptability. Complexity, cost constraints, and time pressure seem to only be increasing. Technological advances have created the need for more specialized trades, more sophisticated decision-making, and more diverse supply chains – to say nothing of how they have increased the challenge of actually building something.

With everything changing in real time, the projects you finish are rarely the projects you started. If you're not agile and flexible, you are equally doomed.

To create flexibility in a world demanding strict planning, you must learn to iterate. You must get comfortable with the fact that while every plan must be the best you can make at the moment, no plan will ever be final. The following four tips will help you manage your firm to thrive in a world where these seemingly contradictory ideas coexist.

1. STOP SHOOTING THE MESSENGER

When things change, schedules go awry. And when schedules go awry, somebody has to turn up in a meeting and explain why; why milestones have been missed or why the jobsite



team is going to fall behind. As humans – and especially as managers – we despise change, so our temptation is to penalize the person bringing us that story. That's the wrong approach.

The more grief you give to the people reporting problems, the fewer problems they will report, and the longer they will wait to report them. After all, they're human too. Instead, practice saying, "Thank you for the early warning."

Encourage and reward people for letting you know about trouble sooner – preferably before it even happens – and you'll find yourself getting better information soon enough to make use of it.

2. START LOOKING FORWARD

If every project has a schedule, and every schedule has milestones, and every meeting is about which ones you have hit and which ones you haven't, then everyone is looking in the wrong direction. No matter how successful or powerful you think you are, you cannot change the past. And the more time you spend debating the reasons for something that already happened, the less time you have left to figure out what to do about what is going to happen next.

Focus the majority of your meeting time on how your understanding of the future has changed. How does real life as you understand it differ from the schedule already laid out? What variations do you expect? Where will you be ahead or behind? Most importantly, what can you do today about the variations you expect tomorrow?

3. START DISPLAYING TWO FUTURES

The problem with talking about the future is that you end up with a whole lot of talking. Don't allow forward-looking meetings to turn into long-winded, narrative presentations about what's to come. Your team can't make good decisions or build good plans if they are all busy listening to one person talk.

Take whatever discipline your people have around drawing up a visual schedule, Gantt chart, or plan, and have them apply it to creating a second one based on what they now know. Then, put that one right next to the first one to make changed expectations obvious.

Don't allow people to attend meetings who aren't prepared to quickly and visually show you how their expectations of the future have changed. That's how you fill the majority of your meetings with discussion about how to adapt to those changes, instead of rambling commentary about what they might or might not be.


4. KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE BIGGER PRIZE

Giving clear goals to competent people is good practice. The thing is, as soon as you do, they immediately start to protect their own interests at the expense of each other. If you have a management team of five people responsible for one project, the last thing you want is each one protecting his/her interests at the expense of the others. Be ruthless in stopping me-

versus-you debates and turning them into we-versus-the-plan conversations.

Remind everyone, "We succeed or fail together so please work together." If one person, group, or function is running early and another is behind, tell the leader who is ahead that it's his/her job (not yours) to determine a way to help. If two people are arguing over a resource they both need, tell them it's their job (not yours) to recommend a solution that minimizes impact to the overall program.

Whether or not you have control over compensation or bonuses, you are still the boss. Tell your team that you'll personally consider all of them to have succeeded or failed based on overall results, instead of individual goals, and you'll get a whole new level of useful problem-solving in place of warring silos.

It's four small things, but together they're huge: Get good information coming in, look forward at what's coming up, leave enough air time in meetings for your people to discuss what to do about it, and frame those debates based on higher-level goals. Get this right, and you'll see communication and collaboration like never before. Your team will get information sooner, make decisions faster, and implement them more fully. And you'll finally have the flexibility to create really good plans, and then change them again and again as you learn why they're not quite good enough. And that's what it means to iterate. 



About the Author

Ed Muzio is the chief executive officer of [Group Harmonics](#) and the award-winning author of *Iterate: Run a Fast, Flexible, Focused Management Team*. Muzio's methodology appears frequently in media. His firm trains and advises executives and professionals worldwide.

About the Article

Republished from [Construction Business Owner](#). Construction Business Owner (CBO) is the leading business magazine for contractors and is designed to help owners of construction firms run successful businesses. Founded in 2004, CBO provides real-world business management education and knowledge that is of real value to the owners of construction companies.

Any views and opinions expressed in this article may or may not reflect the views and opinions of the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA). By publishing this piece, CMAA is not expressing endorsement of the individual, the article, or their association, organization, or company.