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How to Love Your Fuzzy Front End
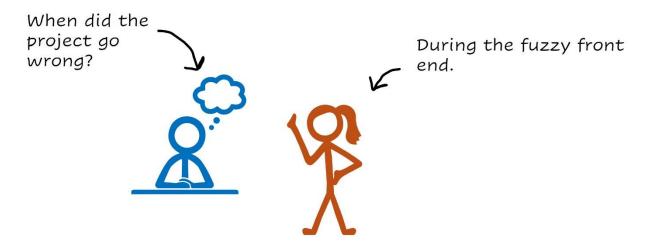by Jeff Oltmann
Advisory

How to Love Your Fuzzy Front End [1]

Jeff Oltmann

Missing the Mark at BioGenesis

Brigette Brooks, director of operations at custom drug development company BioGenesis, has a new headache. Her team just finished a project that was supposed to fix expensive inventory management problems – and the results are dismal. Brigette now sees that things started to go wrong at the very beginning of the project when the team jumped quickly to solution space, rushing right past the "why" questions.

When did the project go wrong?

During the fuzzy front end.

Avoid the Swamp

Seeds of failure often are sown at the start of a project, during its "fuzzy front end." This time can be a swamp of inertia and confusion, or full of innovation and creativity. Here are three ways you can avoid the swamp.

Gather an extended community. These are the people who care most about the new project and what it will create. Early in the project, the project's community is probably more fragmented and larger than you imagine. Gather them and make them an active part

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of defining the project. Weave their diverse perspectives into a strong shared understanding of the specific outcomes the project should produce.

Embrace uncertainty. Pushing to get to certainty too quickly encourages the same old ways of thinking. Instead, ask many open-ended questions to encourage new ways of looking at the problem you want to solve. Focus on stating the problem clearly and broadly. Avoid premature emphasis on "how to." That can come later, after the problem statement is well-formed.

Work backward. Don't make the current state – the way things are done now - the starting point for working out the project's objectives. That creates cognitive bias favoring the status quo. Instead encourage fresh thinking by asking what the future should look like, then work backwards.

Why It Works

A thoughtful fuzzy front end helps the project community define the right target and rally around it. It also stimulates them to think of new approaches to reach that target, creating protected space for creativity and innovation at the time when they can make the most difference. The next time you start a new project, take advantage of this powerful time.

Here's more about navigating the fuzzy front end.

- Full blog post: https://spspro.com/love-fuzzy-front-end/

- Downloadable article with more tips: https://spspro.com/download/navigating-the-fuzzy-front-end

I'd love to hear about your experiences with innovation, projects, and the fuzzy front end.

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Jeff Oltmann is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience advising clients, managing successful technology programs, and developing new products. His specialties include strategy deployment, operational and project excellence, and project portfolio management. As principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, Jeff advises leaders and teams in diverse sectors including healthcare, research, bioscience, and technology product development.

Jeff is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum. He is also on the graduate faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University and was previously on executive staff at IBM. He teaches portfolio, program, and project management and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.