



By Judy Larkins, CPP

Finding Opportunity in the Project that Never Was

Your big packaging project has suddenly fallen apart after all your hard work. Is it a total loss or can you somehow turn it into a win? I believe that despite the setback and disappointment, it can still present an opportunity for you—if you choose to allow it. That approach worked for me, and here is my experience.

It was close to the end of the day when I received the news that a big packaging project I had been driving was being tabled “indefinitely.” During this particular week, this was the second project to be cancelled after months of work.

We all have been there. I had felt particularly invested in my project since it was an idea that had started years back. Because of conflicting priorities, it never got the momentum to become a real initiative until very recently. I powered down my laptop feeling frustrated, disappointed, and even a bit angry. All that time and energy wasted! I would have to relay the news to the project team. And what about the packaging suppliers who had worked feverishly to develop concepts, prototypes, and supply proposals under impossible timelines?

The pivot point

I decided to call my mentor—a former boss at a previous employer—to vent and complain. He listened intently and then as he is known to do, reminded me of a similar challenge we faced when working together. He had been tasked with creating a sourcing team designed solely to find cost-saving opportunities for the medical device company where we worked. I was thrilled to be chosen for the team and together we enthusiastically set out to find savings on packaging, logistics, supply chain, etc.

As we brought ideas to the table, each was summarily shot down. The reasons were many: not enough savings to justify the change, too much risk, insufficient resources. My boss quickly realized he needed to pivot. He restructured the team goals to recognize proposed savings, versus realized savings, as a win. He had the vision to see the company wasn't ready to make changes, but a victory could be

defined not by executed savings but instead by the idea-generation process. By changing the definition of success, he moved the goalpost. Both the company and our team changed the earmark of success. With that, the team felt their efforts were validated and we set out on finding opportunities with a new focus.

A different definition of value

As my mentor reminded me of this experience, I saw the parallel to my current dilemma. I was viewing a successful project only through the lens of seeing a completed product on a store shelf. What if there were another way? What if success is about learning from the process and the experience along the way? Sometimes, it is only after you set off

on a new project that you realize the existing package or process is a better fit than the one you are considering. If you hadn't taken the time and effort to explore something different, you wouldn't have the validation to know that what you are doing already is the best solution. There is value in trying and abandoning the idea you were chasing.

For the suppliers who worked diligently, hoping to win a contract, this isn't necessarily an empty exercise either. Stalled projects can lay the foundation for something down the road. If nothing else, they build a bridge between the two companies.

When a future opportunity arises, they will be front-of-mind as the company to contact. It is about focusing

on the long game. They, too, can learn from the process, and that could make them a better choice for the next customer/project.

I have changed my mindset. I now view every project experience as a potential for learning and growth. It is about the steps along the way. Maybe the project ends up being cancelled, but perhaps in the process, I learn a new skill in managing people or leading a team. Or I discover a new packaging innovation or technology. These learnings stay with us long after the project itself. They accumulate and make us better at what we do.

To that I say—bring on the next project! **PW**

when life
gives
you
LEMONS
make
a lemonade



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