

## A Goosebump Moment

“Before you go too far,” the senior architect said, “I want you to know I’m giving my two weeks’ notice.”

I had barely begun introducing myself. I had been hired as the third project manager assigned to a struggling seven-person team responsible for building a new revenue management system. The project had already failed to deliver multiple times. Deadlines had slipped. Confidence had eroded. Leadership was frustrated.

I walked into the room that morning feeling optimistic. I believed that if we worked together, we could find a way forward. I did not even get through my second sentence. The architect sat back in his chair, arms crossed. He looked exhausted. The kind of exhaustion that comes from trying hard for too long without seeing progress. The kind of exhaustion when you have given up.

His words hung in the air. My heart sank. Losing a key architect is difficult on any project. Losing one before the project even restarted could derail it entirely. Everyone was looking at me to see what I would do. For a moment, I was at a loss.

Then I asked the only question that came to mind. “Would you give me two more weeks before making that decision?”

He studied me for a moment. Skeptical. After a year invested in the project, two more weeks was not too much to ask. Finally, he nodded. "Fine."

Two weeks. That was my runway.

I decided to start differently than originally planned. Instead of giving a pep talk or discussing what the team needed to do, I asked a simple question.

"What are the biggest obstacles preventing you from succeeding?"

At first the room was quiet. Then someone spoke up. I went to the whiteboard and wrote it down. Another followed. Soon the team began sharing the issues that had been frustrating them for months. Some were technical. Others were organizational. A few were surprisingly small problems that had simply been stuck inside the bureaucracy of a large company.

At the end, the whiteboard was full. Watching the team, I knew they felt vindicated. There were legitimate reasons they had not been able to succeed. They were also intrigued to see what would come next. I had my first opening to move them from doubting success was possible to considering maybe it could be different this time.

I said we would work to eliminate the obstacles, keeping the list updated as we knocked them out. A couple of them had the look that said, 'good luck - it is going to be harder than you think'.

I also did something that surprised the team. I moved my desk into their project room. If we were going to solve problems together, I wanted to be there when the problems

were happening. I wanted to hear and observe how they were working together — or not. We began twice a day meetings. Not for status updates, but to work on removing obstacles and figuring things out together.

One of the obstacles had been particularly frustrating for the team. They needed security access to establish an end-to-end test environment. Without it, they could not fully test the solution. Something that should have taken minutes had been stalled for weeks in a maze of forms, approvals, and unanswered requests.

I tracked down the person responsible for granting the access. I thought by talking to him directly instead of sending forms the access could be granted quickly. I was soon reminded that large corporations have a reputation for moving slowly for a reason.

The security access person was rushing to a meeting when I found him. I quickly explained what I needed and he just as quickly shook his head.

“I don’t have time today.”

“No problem, I’ll wait.”

He allowed himself a little laugh. “I really won’t have time today.”

I knew I could not just leave. He was busy and likely would never find the time if I was not persistent. I noticed the chair that was sitting next to his cubicle for visitors. I hatched a plan.

I sat down in his visitor’s chair. “No worries. I’ll work from here and wait until you do.” He just continued shaking his head as he walked away.

I sat there all morning. He came back before lunch. I was still there. He just smiled, grabbed his lunch and left for an afternoon full of more meetings.

Late in the afternoon he returned to his desk. I was still sitting there doing my work.

He paused. I could see him contemplating how to deal with me. "You'll be back tomorrow, won't you?"

"Yes."

He sighed, sat down, and asked me to remind him what I needed. I handed him the form and explained that our team just needed access to a test environment.

Ten minutes later the access for our team was granted. Just ten minutes. I am convinced the access would have been stalled for another couple of days, if not weeks, if I had not made myself the squeaky wheel.

The next morning, I walked into the project room and told the team they had the needed security access. None of them expected it. I watched as they looked at each other with a combination of surprise and intrigue. The architect — the one who had planned to quit just the day before — allowed himself a small smile. The team was watching and absorbing. I had successfully moved them from doubt to possibility.

The belief challenges extended beyond just our team. I still remember the first time I met our business sponsor. I waited until the start of my second week to ensure I had learned enough to have a productive meeting. He was a senior executive at a Fortune 50 company, working there his entire career while rising through the ranks. His office was

enormous, filled with dark mahogany furniture at a scale that was intimidating. I was in my early 30s and, if anything, I looked younger than my age.

Looking back at it now, I imagine that when he saw me walking in as his last hope to deliver success, he must have felt deflated. He was joined by his two key lieutenants, one of whom would be our primary day to day contact. I was joined by our senior architect and the IT manager who had hired me. We all sat down at his oversized table. I felt small. And yet, I also felt confident. In just the short week of working with the team, I knew we had a chance.

After the introductions, our sponsor stared directly at me and did not mince words. "This team has failed to deliver twice. If I had a choice, there wouldn't be a third chance. But I don't. So, tell me, why do you think you can deliver when others have failed?"

He was not happy. He was depending on our project to drive the entire company's annual revenue planning process. The prior failures had been painful. He was now looking at the third reboot of the project. I realized it was worse than him doubting us. He now believed failure was a certainty. I needed to restore his belief, and quickly.

I kept my eyes directly on him. I could feel my companions shrink back in their chairs. Instead, I leaned forward thinking that I was going to like working with this guy. He was no-nonsense and direct, exactly my style.

"I have spent the last week diving into the project with our team. I know there have been, and still are, many challenges. If it weren't possible, I would let you know now. But I haven't learned anything that is insurmountable if we

can partner with you and your team. I promise you, if that ever changes and I don't believe we can deliver, I will let you know. No surprises. But back to why me? Because I have never failed to deliver."

I watched his reaction. I could tell he was slightly amused but definitely not convinced. "I appreciate confidence, but sometimes it can be misguided. Please don't take this the wrong way, but I think you are inexperienced and still a bit naive. Success isn't guaranteed."

Fair points. But sometimes being inexperienced, even naive, is what allows you to take the risks that lead to real growth.

"I realize I don't have decades of experience, but I have already delivered many challenging projects. I want to be clear. I'm not saying there haven't been mistakes and failures along the way. There always are — that is the nature of a project, particularly when delivering a technology solution for a challenging business problem. What I am saying, however, is by working with my team and business partners, I have always found ways to course correct. We have learned from the mistakes and updated our plans, scope, phasing, or approach as needed. But we have never given up. We have always found new ways to deliver success."

That was enough for him to hear. He moved from certainty we would fail again, to allowing himself a small glimmer of hope that it might work this time. We quickly moved into a working session. It was just the beginning, but it was a productive meeting positioning us for the project to relaunch.

## A GOOSEBUMP MOMENT

Over those first couple of weeks something began to change in our project room. It slowly became louder. The quiet tension that filled the space when I first arrived became conversations. Conversations led to ideas. Ideas evolved into plans. Our meetings shifted from explaining why things would not work, to figuring out how they could.

Near the end of the two weeks, something happened that I will never forget. During one of our team meetings, the senior architect spoke up.

“I’ve decided I’m not giving my notice.”

No dramatic speech. Just a simple statement. But everyone in the room understood what it meant. Something had shifted. For the first time in a long time, the team believed they had a chance to succeed.

I remember feeling goosebumps.

At the time I chalked them up to my excitement. Now I know it was the moment that not only had the team begun to really believe, so had I. Our belief was progressing.

But believing did not mean it would be easy. We faced almost every type of challenge you can imagine for a corporate IT project.

We were using newer technologies that forced the IT department to change some of their long-held processes and procedures. We had to develop new ways to do configuration control and deployment. For any of you who have worked at a large company, you know change is not easy and things do not move quickly. I earned a lot of battle scars during that project but kept fighting until we got the help and changes we needed.

The new technologies were challenging for our team, too. We were early adopters and had to work through a lot of bugs in the different software products. We also had to figure out how to make the technologies work together. There were countless roadblocks, missteps and learnings along the way. But we fought through all of them. The more progress we made, the more the team believed that the technology would not be the reason for failure.

The more we experienced success as a team, the more our belief grew. You could feel the excitement and energy growing both within each individual and within the team itself. I could feel myself starting to embody the belief of our team.

Eight months after the project restart, we successfully delivered in time for the business' next annual planning cycle. Our business partner was ecstatic. We had restored his belief in the ability of the IT team to deliver. We had become a high-performing team who now believed they could do anything if they worked together.

Our team went on to win IT Project Team of the Year at the company. The team that had failed two times before was now a model on how to deliver successfully. And the architect who had nearly quit? He eventually followed me to another company where he spent years mentoring younger developers before retiring. He had become a Belief Builder.

That is the framework in action. Leaders who understand how to build belief in their teams have the power to unlock potential and deliver success beyond what anyone thinks is possible. The rest of this book will show you how to do it.