What did you say?

MOLTEN METAL EQUIPMENT INNOVATIONS

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ARTICLE TAKEAWAYS:

- Never Assume
- Check each step
- Build a system
- Follow up

Just use ChatGPT says one of my kids.... who knows, maybe someday they will be right. For now, we're going to have to keep on doing it the old-fashioned way and engage in actual dialogue.

Of course, not all of it will be in person, some may be in different languages and in all cases, there will be a big difference in what is said and what is heard. It is difficult to overstate the importance of clear communication in business. In most cases we rely on a mix of verbal and written communication that together determine the outcomes and what we achieve. In the work we do at MMEI with our customers we strive for effective communication in everything we do. Here are the things we have seen to be most important in achieving the always desired outcome of complete customer satisfaction.

CLEAR DEFINITION OF RESPONSIBILITY UP FRONT

We have all heard the old adage of why one should never assume, and it is a great foundational piece for starting the communication process on a new project. Best practices in this area will emphasize written communication and ideally use tools like detailed quotations, purchase orders, checklists and other effective ways to ensure that there is clear definition of who is responsible for each part of the project work to be done. Customers should ask, "what are you providing and what am I responsible for?" as question number one. Given the likelihood that there will be multiple parties involved in addition to just the vendor and the customer, this becomes imperative and should not be left to verbal communication only. In our experience, the best way to approach this is to start with a clear outline of the scope of work to be performed. The quote should incorporate clear language as to the responsibilities of each party up front. The quote will outline all of what is to be provided both in terms of product purchased as well as service and support provided as part of the installation and run off process. The more standard this language can be made the better as it should avoid ambiguity as to the major elements of the project. In most cases, given that the equipment will be installed in the customer's facility this will require the customer to accept responsibility for the project elements that they will control. So, even before there is a PO, the scope of work is made clear and the responsibility for who will be handling each aspect of the project has been established in writing.

OK, NOW WE'VE AGREED TO WORK TOGETHER

The Purchase Order will serve as the contract between the two parties and evidence that we are now working together. There should be an acceptance process that requires each party to take ownership of the project to the next level with a detailed checklist. There is a reason that the FAA and the commercial aviation industry require the use of checklists. It is because it forces the review of every critical aspect of the process and greatly reduces the likelihood that any of the process steps be overlooked. The human factor still exists, but checklists are a very effective mechanism for minimizing the likelihood of missed items that ultimately compromise the project and the goal of complete customer satisfaction. In the case of MMEI, we use a detailed checklist system that includes the following key elements: a detailed quote, a written PO agreement with terms, product assembly drawings, delivery schedule and

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packaging lists, all schematics required, a detailed spreadsheet that clearly outlines all parties involved (internal and external) and who will perform each step, a Gantt chart that clearly shows the timeline and all due dates. One of our team members added some context from his days in aerospace by saying, "we would even go deeper, and add specifications for each product for everything, i.e. pressures, temperatures, flow rates, reliability, fatigue properties, and even compliance with LEED and supply chain requirements such as no single point of failure in the supply chain to ensure deliveries. We and our suppliers would have continuous coordination meetings during design, test part manufacturing, testing and validation to review the means of compliance and all test results." Building a system of this type is a great investment that can pay dividends for years as it again seeks to standardize the process to avoid confusion. Over time, the system can be updated to incorporate new project steps and/or changes that will benefit the process. Two key aspects of success with a system of this type are that each party (and this will almost always be more than two) participates in the process of the project checklist review and that the responsible parties sign off on each key element of the project. This is the best way to ensure accountability and avoid the pitfalls of a less disciplined approach.

KEEP TALKING

The benefits of having the process documented as per the system above are many, but of course, the world never quite turns in the way we all want it to, and so it is imperative that there be ongoing communication to address inevitable changes. The most effective way to do this is to implement a project management tool that requires a frequency of communication with the project leaders that prevents issues from impacting the overall project outcome once they have been identified. A simple part of the system will be agreement around the mode of communication and the requirement of the responsible parties to be involved. This step is a balance between clear leadership of each aspect of the project, including a single overall project manager at the customer, and the commitment to keep the meeting schedule, even if only to say, "all's well." Generally, what takes projects off track is the cascading effect of individual tasks/responsibilities that don't occur. In most cases, this is due to the need for multiple stakeholders to remain committed to the project system and accountable to the outcomes. For roles and responsibilities, we commonly use a RACI matrix. Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed. This helps to define who is doing the work and who has to know about it in varying degrees.

In addition to the Compliance matrix, the RACI matrix helps us develop our Communication Plan. Another spreadsheet that indicates how often we need to meet, what will be reviewed, who is required in the meetings, and who is copied on the report outs or meeting notes. In practice this can allow functional areas that often seem to have competing agendas to see how they each contribute to a successful outcome. In our case, this often is seen most directly in two areas: first, maintenance and production and second, mechanical engineering and electrical/controls engineering. In both areas, success will go back to the prior step of clearly outlining who is going to do what. When that is written down and owned (signature on the dotted line) it makes for a much-improved process. Companies will look at this differently, and often there are operating metrics/KPI's that will point to who should be responsible for different aspects of the project. Understanding this ahead of time will greatly increase the likelihood for success, and prevent the expensive inefficiency when one part of the process delays another. A common example in our work, is the importance of making sure everything is ready prior to commissioning. If possible, we will visit the site prior to make sure all of the equipment has arrived and is ready to be installed and that the necessary electrical, mechanical and other elements to finish the work are all in place.

IT'S A PARTNERSHIP

As the project nears completion the emphasis can shift to training and a knowledge transfer to ensure that the new equipment provides all the intended benefits. The extent to which post commissioning training and support will be provided should be agreed upon much earlier in the process and clear to all involved. While it may be that the project requirements have all been met and the new equipment is installed and running, much of the real work has yet to even begin. The goal is always to form a working partnership in which we continue to communicate effectively and look for ways to continuously improve performance and outcomes. It is always dynamic and is the basis upon which both companies can enhance their value proposition. There is a great opportunity for performance tracking to demonstrate that the project goals have been met and to establish future objectives that continue to provide benefits.

While it is fun to think about the many ways new AI technology will further enhance what we all can do, I am a firm believer that the human element and solid communication skills will never go out of style. In the end, the real reward we all take away from this is the satisfaction of developing new relationships and the feeling that we've done something of value.

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MOLTEN METAL
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INNOVATORS IN ALUMINUM PUMPING SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

- Circulation Pumps
- Transfer Pumps
- Degassing/Flux Injection Equipment
- Scrap Submergence Systems
- Pump & Ladle Preheating Stations
- Smart Pump Technology
- Control Systems
- Spare Parts & Service
- Graphite Machining

Global performance makes a world of difference.
Proven to deliver more metal flow, efficient transfer,
& higher yields.

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