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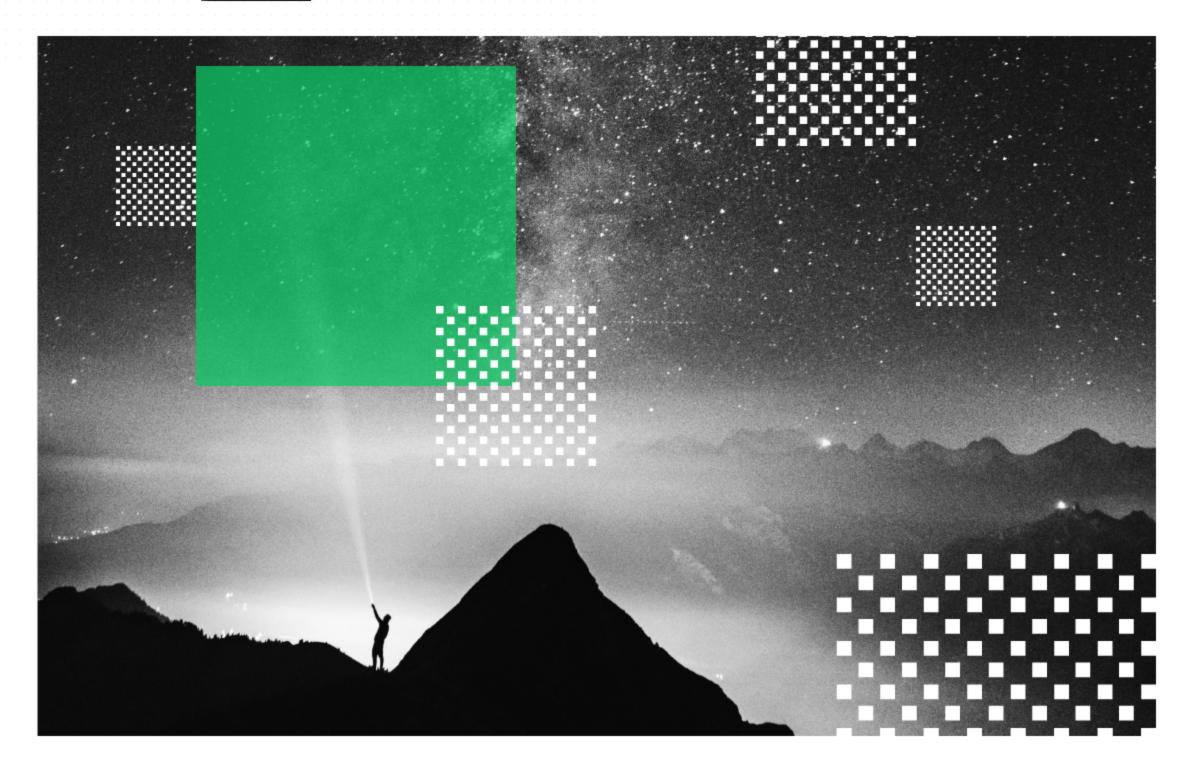
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What's Detouring Your Project? Discovery Helps Reveal Roadblocks

By **Brad Nunnally** | June 19, 2019

Advisory & Support Services

Who remembers taking road trips in the days before smartphones? With a map stowed in your glove compartment and a ridiculous number of pages of MapQuest printouts, you'd embark with a fresh playlist and the hope of making it to your destination smoothly. We all know plans like this rarely went off without a single hitch, whether it was traffic, an urgent pit-stop between rest areas, or a catastrophic accident that blocked the only major highway between you and your destination. In cases like those, it was time to break out the maps and assess alternate routes, selecting the best one that would hopefully be unaffected by your current roadblock. This scenario may still feel familiar to many of you—except the setting is in the conference room, not the car.

Projects often begin with the best of intentions, but there comes a time when even the best laid plan executed by the strongest team will hit a snag. When that happens, it's time to take a step back and examine the map, if you will. The underlying issue won't always be obvious, nor is it usually isolated to the project at hand—many times, it has ripple effects that reach into other areas of your organization, too. The process of slowing down to reassess is called Discovery, and it can mean the difference between a project's success or failure.

Can my project benefit from Discovery?

This is a question we hear we hear a lot when planning kickoffs for new projects or next phases of existing projects. The answer is always "Yes!" No matter what phase a project might be in, it can benefit from some form of Discovery. The process behind Discovery is flexible by its very nature. This is due to the process' underlying goal, which is to find a greater definition around a problem an organization is dealing with. Problems can pop up at any stage of a project, and Discovery is one of many methods that can get a team back on track and moving toward a solution that works for its end users and the business sponsoring the project. Below are the ways Discovery helps in each project stage:

Project kickoff

Sometimes good product design and development strategy gets lost in the drive to be as agile and lean as possible in the project kickoff stage. Conducting Discovery early allows a team to do just enough research and product strategy to get that backlog generated using research-based information. This in turn empowers the team to make more informed decisions.

Project plateauing

Most projects will hit a plateau at some point. You'll know you've hit yours when your team runs out of questions to ask about what a product can do and how it allows organizations/users to be successful. When this happens, Discovery is your go-to tool for jumpstarting team curiosity and infusing the backlog with new ideas, questions, and solutions that drive the product, the team, and even the organization to grow into new areas.

Product launch

It's launch time and your team's hard work is about to come to fruition—how exciting! One question that comes up during this phase is "Now what? What should we do next?" By restarting the Discovery process, you'll prompt your team to reassess their goals and problems with a fresh perspective. This will hopefully lead to insights on new opportunities and areas for improvement.

Discovery is about asking difficult questions

Effective leadership means having the courage and vision to ask tough questions. It's not easy to acknowledge something isn't working as it should but doing so is the only way to move past roadblocks. Discovery involves entire teams in a process of professional soul searching to get to the root of the issues haunting your project or organization. The three main questions Discovery seeks to answer are as follows:

Why is a problem plaguing a product or organization?

By asking this research-based question, your team can gain a better understanding of the circumstances contributing to a persistent problem with a specific product or the organization as a whole. Making the conscious decision to take a step back and focus on the problem itself, investigate the root cause, and understand the impact of that issue better prepares you to create an effective solution. This investigation includes first understanding the client's viewpoint of an issue before creating a shared understanding across the various stakeholders. Then, it's imperative to acknowledge how the problem impacts the user base. What frustration and stress does it create for users?

How does this problem affect other products or parts of the organization?

No project is an island—most are part of an overarching ecosystem of applications and systems. If an issue arises that directly impacts one part of this ecosystem, it's very likely other systems and applications suffer from the problem as well. Discovery forces the project team to look at the ripple effect a problem could be creating across the organization and identify areas of opportunities that may have been missed in the day-to-day.

How should my team address the problem?

Once a team has gained fresh insight about the problem and how it impacts an organization and its users, they are able to create solutions in a new and innovative way. These types of solutions have an added benefit—they impact other teams as they find ways to use the research and problem solving process for their own purposes. This is thanks to the focus on understanding the whole ecosystem of an organization and how their solution impacts and influences other areas of the organization.

Discovery – forcing a team to slow down so they can speed up

It's common for teams to fall into the trap of rushing towards a solution before properly taking stock of the full situation. This rush often leads to uninspiring solutions that are more likely to miss the mark than anything. The methods and processes built into a good Discovery process helps teams take a moment to better understand all factors contributing to the current situation, revealing a clearer path forward.

This moment of thinking and analyzing also allows a team to discover unexpected opportunities they may have missed had they jumped straight into building something. The core questions Discovery answers give the process enough flexibility to be used in a variety of ways, meaning every team and project can benefit from it.

Want to learn more about how Discovery can benefit your project? Contact us today to speak with our Discovery team.

Case Study – NASA Discovery

When U.Group sat down to define our Discovery process, we looked to build off our past success to avoid recreating the wheel. One project that we drew inspiration from was with NASA, where we worked with our stakeholders to define a communication strategy to help build awareness around NASA Earth Science Applied Sciences Program. By addressing similar questions that are mentioned above, we worked with our stakeholders to discover that the Program was hindered by the sheer volume of content. A lot of the content was overly technical, making it difficult for some key audiences to understand and digest the benefits and impact of the Program's work. Through the Discovery process, as well as subsequent efforts, we helped Program teams to better conceive, produce, and maintain communications efforts consistently and deliberately, focusing on storytelling and the people behind the work.

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