

Building A Puzzle

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What was a good thing that happened for you during the great pandemic lockdown? Everyone I have talked to can come up with at least one thing they started doing or rediscovered in their lives. One of the things I started doing again was jigsaw puzzles. I enjoy building puzzles, but what makes it most fun for me is the collaboration the activity fosters. A puzzle on a table is an open invitation to anyone who chooses work on it. There are no special rules, no prescribed process, or step-by-step instructions other than put the puzzle together.

The big picture is crucial

The beauty of a puzzle as a group activity is that there is a very clear picture — a result that is visualized by everyone involved in the work. When you have a clear objective, you can work as a team to figure out a way to get there. Have you ever tried to put a puzzle together without the complete picture on the box as a reference? It certainly makes the task more difficult.

Small steps

There are many ways to solve a jigsaw puzzle. Most people start by separating the boundary pieces. Later, you may find it helpful to separate the pieces by like colors. Seeing the pieces come together one-by-one along the way is motivating. It is helpful to see progress to know you are on the right track. Without these small successes, you may lose focus and momentum.

For any team approaching a big project, small steps are critical to success. It is easy to look at the big goal and feel overwhelmed. If the work is hard, and there is little collaboration and no sense of accomplishment, it is entirely possible the project can collapse under its own weight and die an untimely death. Breaking down small action steps aimed at getting to the goal is easily overlooked or seen as a waste of time, but it is vital to making the work accessible and providing measurable wins.

Know when to pause and refocus

Another vitally important aspect of the work is focus. Team effort requires a balance between the need for meticulous work and the need to see the big picture, which can be lost when you're focusing on details. Sometimes finding that one puzzle piece demands too much time and effort. The strategic leader must identify these moments and help the team "get on the balcony," restoring perspective and realigning the team's focus. I am amazed how often walking away, regaining perspective, and returning to the work can spark significant progress.

Remember, in the end, it is less about putting that last piece in place and more about the journey to that piece. The beauty of the puzzle-building experience is the way in which it brings unlikely collaborators together. When the task is defined and the end result is clear, people will work together in unexpected ways. Challenges will present themselves, but those on the project will work through them and find success if they have a good idea of what success looks like.

Like any puzzle, your projects may begin as a pile of random pieces but eventually – step by step – become a beautiful picture.