Lessons from a Determined Influencer: The Rise, Fall—and Eventual Resurrection—of Monica Ashley and “Project Hippocrates”

We now take a careful look at a complex situation in which there are many influence transactions over several years. After describing Monica Ashley’s monumental efforts to move many people to accept an important strategic product shift at her medical equipment company, we will use the concepts introduced in previous chapters to illuminate what Monica did well and where she might have been more effective.

Influence in Implementing Strategic Change: The Monica Ashley Case

Monica Ashley was stunned. Just as she was successfully completing a complex, two-year project that could be a major contributor to the future growth of Health Equipment and Laboratories, Inc. (HEAL-INC), she was removed as program manager by her boss, Dan Stella.

Although Dan, vice-president for design and manufacture of one of the top lines of HEAL-INC machines, asked her to stay on in his division, Monica felt that personal defeat had been snatched from the jaws of victory. The glory from her massive effort to enable HEAL-INC to adapt its hospital-oriented, technically-driven products and strategies to much wider usage would go elsewhere. It wasn’t that she was hung up on glory, but it didn’t seem fair to be pulled out of this incredible accomplishment just as it was finally about to overcome the ferocious opposition that had made it even more difficult than it naturally was. And,
Figure 9-1
PARTIAL ORGANIZATION CHART—HEAL-INC

President
(Gary Dorr)

Senior VP
Sales & Service

Senior VP
R&D
(Todd Benson)

Senior VP
Marufac.

VP
Maj. Prod.
Line Design
(Dan Stella)

VP
Signal Proc.
Design
(Ralph Parker)

Program Manager
(Monica Ashley)

Manager
(Ed Kane)

Senior Designer
(Phil Edison)

Analog Signal Processor Designers
she feared—correctly as it turned out—that over a year would be lost in replacing her and getting a replacement up to speed.

HEAL-INC was a rapidly growing company making a wide range of advanced diagnostic and treatment equipment. Utilizing many complex technologies, from lasers to powerful magnets to semiconductors and signal processors, the company had thrived on the enormous latitude given its very bright employees to take initiative and pursue opportunities. Since its inception, HEAL-INC had found great success by creating equipment that appealed to the same kinds of technically sophisticated hospital researchers and technicians it employed. Early on, top management decided that creating an atmosphere of maximum freedom would be worth the waste and duplicated effort, since it would tap the creativity and energy of smart employees. The strategy had worked, and HEAL-INC's meteoric growth had been a source of pride to management and employees—and sometimes a source of puzzlement to those who had been taught to revere order and efficiency above all else.

**More Tech, More Touch:**
**New Users and Their Needs**

In recent years, however, the market had begun to shift, along with the technology in the industry. The equipment was increasingly going to be used in doctors' offices, small clinics, and storefront test labs, rather than exclusively in teaching hospitals. New users of the equipment were less technical and more patient-oriented than the hospital staffers who had been the company's original customers.

Furthermore, in order to make the equipment easier for less sophisticated personnel to use, the technology had grown more complicated; thus, far greater coordination and teamwork in design and manufacture became necessary. Many different, but interrelated, components had to be designed by teams of contributors, rather than developed for special purposes by solo "geniuses." There were pressures for some key components to shift from analog to digital electronics. And purchasers were becoming more selective, so their interests had to be taken into account at an earlier stage of product design. Finally, it was increasingly difficult for any one company, no matter how big, to custom design all the components of the equipment. The industry leaders were beginning to form strategic alliances and purchase components from outside sources.
All of this caused considerable tension at HEAL-INC and entrepreneurial companies like it. The original ways of doing things had brought huge success, and the company was young enough so that many of those who had grown with it were still entrenched. They had a big stake in their hard-won lessons about growth, decentralization, encouragement of initiative, technical orientation, and the virtues of inventing everything within the company. The voices of those arguing the urgent strategic need for greater ease of operation, more coordination of previously autonomous units, and purchasing components and subsystems elsewhere were not readily heard.

The President of HEAL-INC Recruits Monica for "Project Hippocrates"

Monica had been squarely in the middle of just such issues. She had taken on "Project Hippocrates" reluctantly, because, even though she was ready for a line job after many successful years in important staff positions, she knew there would be major opposition. Over her years at HEAL-INC, she had developed a special relationship with Gary Dorr, the current president, which began at a meeting early in her career when she caught his attention by challenging his conclusions. He liked her spirit and the hard work that had enabled her to back up her views with data when he asked why she disagreed. After that, Dorr had periodic long talks with Monica and once told her that he thought of her as his HEAL-INC daughter. So, before taking the assignment as program manager of Project Hippocrates, Monica went to see Dorr.

She explained to him her concerns, especially in relation to a key manager, Ralph Parker, the vice-president in charge of designing the key signal processor used in several lines of HEAL-INC equipment. Monica had heard through the grapevine that Parker, who was in a different division from hers, was politically aggressive and had not been helpful on another project that her boss, Dan Stella, had pioneered. A different approach to signal processing—from analog to digital—would be needed for Project Hippocrates; and, as the main designer of HEAL-INC's original analog signal processors, Parker could be a major roadblock.

So many people in her division had talked about Parker's legendary resistance to new approaches and to customer input that Monica took their views as fact and didn't bother to talk with Parker directly. She just decided that she wouldn't be another in the long line of people she knew complaining about their inability
to move him; she would set out to demonstrate overwhelmingly the correctness of the need for a new signal processor design.

Dorr told Monica that he knew about the problem with Parker, and that he was working on it. He told her not to take Parker on directly, but to accept the program manager role, since she "would be protected." Before Monica could reply with her continuing concerns, Dorr ended the meeting by saying, "Monica, congratulations to the new program manager."

**A Whirlwind of Activities**

Monica plunged in, tackling the project with the same focused intensity that she brought to everything she did. She first interviewed the new kinds of purchasers to understand their very different needs; created a task force; recruited members from other parts of HEAL-INC; introduced to HEAL-INC for the first time to the Taguchi method, a highly disciplined product design process she had learned in Japan; and initiated a series of studies on just what would be needed to alter HEAL-INC's equipment to make it more viable for new applications. All of this activity made people uncomfortable, because the structured Taguchi process was far more rigorous than anyone was used to; and it led to something that had never been done before at HEAL-INC: a total system outline for the product revisions, including all the elements and how they would have to fit together. She created a cross-department signal-processor study group to investigate whether the existing component could handle the redesigned equipment. As Monica had intuited, the study group determined that no in-house analog product could do the job and recommended the purchase from an outside vendor of the necessary digital signal processor.

**Just One More Study: Difficulties with Outside Purchase of Signal Processors**

This recommendation set off many months of problems. The decision was made, restudied, made again, restudied, and remade four times. Twice Monica gave presentations before the senior management staff, with competing presentations given by the signal-processor design group under Parker. Parker was nasty to her and made numerous accusations, including one that the technical people she had used in her study group were not competent (even though some had come from lower levels of Parker's organization, and two had been loaned by Phil Edison, the most...
respected technical person in the company). Parker had publicly declared that any kind of signal processor would be purchased outside only “over my dead body.” And even after the senior management staff gave the go-ahead, Parker accused Monica of proceeding without permission. So, still another independent task force was created to evaluate the decision; once again, the outcome was in Monica’s favor.

At the first senior management staff meeting, Gary Dorr surprised Monica by being more critical and less friendly than Monica had ever experienced. He had often complained in the past about the need at HEAL-INC to define measures that would spell out the performance of an entire diagnostic and treatment system, not just its components. Worried about the common HEAL-INC problem of components being optimized but the complete system ending up suboptimized (the whole being less than the sum of its parts), Monica had developed detailed, integrated plans, but Dorr seemed annoyed rather than pleased. At the meeting, he criticized Monica for the comprehensive approach.

Monica was confused, then flabbergasted at Dorr’s continued critical tone. At first she couldn’t say anything, she was so taken aback. Then as the meeting went on, she realized that Dan Stella, her boss, wasn’t speaking up and defending the massive amount of work she had done to insure that components would not be suboptimized at the expense of the total equipment systems. Assuming that her past relationship with Dorr legitimized disagreement with him, she defended the decisions. She knew that customers used different criteria for measuring overall equipment performance than the designers of each component, and she wanted that recognized.

Parker had attended the meetings of the Project Hippocrates group, during which he challenged Monica constantly and, in her view, tried to provoke her. Because Dan Stella had advised Monica to keep cool, she avoided taking Parker’s bait. Then, during one meeting at which Monica asked Parker a question, he accused her of being angry. She coolly replied, “It seems to me that you’re the one who is angry.” Parker exploded. Monica just let him yell, then proceeded with the meeting.

After the meeting, all who attended, including Dan, congratulated Monica for “humiliating Parker,” which had not been her intent at all. She was just trying to head off a fight, as she had been advised. But the battle lines hardened further. From then on, Parker assigned one of his managers, Ed Kane, to attend Project Hippocrates task force meetings on his behalf.
At one of the subsequent meetings, Kane heatedly accused Monica of not listening and of excluding signal processor people. She was embarrassed by the attack and unhappy about being falsely accused; but, as was her custom, she handled the unjust attacks by providing more accurate information. Thinking, "If he knows the truth, he'll cool off," she told Kane the history of how the original cross-functional design team, including people from his own organization, had agreed unanimously on the need for a switch to digital signal processing, and the requisite acquisition of an outside product.

There was so much conflict at that meeting that, as it broke up, Monica's boss, Dan Stella, called a spontaneous meeting of his own managers in a nearby conference room. Because Kane was standing outside the room and he was available to attend, Stella invited him "to c'mon in and help us plan."

Once inside, an obviously outraged Kane shouted, "Who the hell do you think you are, going to an outside vendor!" and called Stella a "traitor and a renegade." Stella retorted that if anyone was a traitor it was Kane, because the signal processor department of which Kane was a member had said to go ahead, and now he was trying to subvert their decision. In Monica's eyes, the confrontation was particularly brutal ('like dinosaurs slugging it out'), especially since she knew that Stella did not particularly like conflict.

Soon after, friends of Monica began to tell her that Kane was spreading nasty personal rumors about her, including innuendoes that she was having an affair with Stella. Stunned and hurt, she decided there was nothing she could do about it. Her friends would know how absurd the rumors were, and she believed that telling others she was innocent would only help dignify the rumors. She persevered in the project.

A month later, Parker once again challenged the outside purchase decision. Monica was called to an extended senior management staff meeting where she was given one day to make a presentation of the complete program; Parker was given the next day for his rebuttal.

Twisting in the Wind: Abandoned by the President

Monica was shocked by what happened at the meeting. She had barely started her presentation when Gary Dorr began to attack her. He said that no one person was going to be in control, that Monica in particular was trying to over-control things—"like an
Imperial Chinese Emperor' was how he phrased it—and that central control was totally inappropriate for the company. Seeing Parker smirking in the background and feeling extraordinarily jittery after the attack by the president, Monica mustered her courage and told Dorr that she was only giving the complete system overview he had asked for. Every time she tried to give a detailed calculation, Dorr broke in again with criticism. Monica and her group were devastated; they were certain that Dorr had been totally prejudiced by Parker.

When Parker made his presentation the following day, Dorr was very receptive to him. In Monica’s eyes, however, Parker had no solid data; and his presentation was devoid of content and filled with glib assertions and pronouncements. The main theme of his argument was, “Haven’t we always met hospital needs? Just look at our original analog signal processor: It’s the best in the business, and it can be adapted to any need our customers have.”

As she sat there in disbelief, Monica recalled a comment Dorr had once made to her privately. He had told her that there was no way the company could do without Parker because of his signal processor contributions. After Parker finished, the people in his group were slapping each other on the back; and Kane walked over to sneer, “Ha, ha, you lose!” at Monica. She was upset that Parker and his supporters had done so much behind-closed-doors political maneuvering and it absolutely infuriated her that “politics could beat out substance” in the company. Only Dorr’s earlier warning about not confronting Parker kept her from retaliating.

Sticking the knife in was not enough for Parker. He had to twist it. At the end of the meeting, Parker again brought up Monica’s negotiation for the digital processor with an outside company. Dorr exploded, and yelled at Monica, “How dare you negotiate on behalf of the company?! You are a renegade and an empire-builder!”

Although, by this point, Monica was down for the count, she defended what had happened, explaining that she acted upon a decision that had been cleared by many groups. But then, when Dorr turned to Edison, the most respected technical expert, and asked him if it had gone through the review committee he headed, Edison claimed he did not remember. Monica was amazed and shocked, since the technical guru had always been friendly to her; and he certainly was present when the decision had been made by his review committee.

Dorr then said that he was going to go around the room and take a vote on going outside. He said that he personally would
Influence in Implementing Strategic Change

only vote if there were a tie. As fate would have it, there was a tie vote. Dorr turned to Monica and asked her how she would interpret the tie.

Monica had been sitting near Dorr at the meeting. After his attack, he acted conciliatory, and they even exchanged whispered comments several times, so Monica was feeling a bit restored in her relationship with him. Although she was scared of how it might be taken, she summoned up a sense of humor that she was rarely able to use when tense and deadpanned. “I would say that there was an overwhelming sentiment for going ahead with the outside negotiations.” Dorr laughed and agreed. Monica was enormously relieved.

At the next senior management staff meeting, Dorr wanted one more vote on the issue of negotiating with an outside vendor. When the results were in, only one person had voted against the outside purchase: Parker. One of the executive vice-presidents then turned to Parker and said, “You will have to speak now or forever hold your peace.” Parker finally retorted that the move was against his better judgment and that, when it proved to be a giant mistake, it would be on the heads of Monica and her boss, Dan Stella.

Heat in the Kitchen: Put out the Fire

Monica felt herself constantly being drawn into conflict even though she had wanted to accomplish the whole project by building consensus. In part, she had been driven by her assumptions about her relationship with Dorr. She had assumed that he still wanted her to stand up for what she believed in.

Upset, she went to talk to him about what had happened at the various meetings. He told her that she was no longer behaving appropriately; because she was acting like a “hot competitor” when she came to the senior management staff, she was disturbing the company’s once-peaceful and productive environment.

In her defense, she tried to explain that it was not she who was causing the problems but Kane and Parker. She reminded Dorr that he himself had said Parker was a problem, but Dorr replied “That is none of your business.” She knew that Dorr admired her for having the drive to complete her advanced studies and other complex company assignments, and that he counted on her as somebody who could carry things through, but she had overestimated the amount of support she would get from him in Project Hippocrates.
Throughout Monica's career at HEAL-INC, Dan Stella had phoned her on Sunday evenings to review the previous week and discuss what was coming up. As the infighting increased at the senior staff meetings, Stella told Monica in one of these Sunday night phone conversations that she was going too fast and causing conflict. When things got very hot, he called her into his office and tried to slow her down. She said, "Don't these people understand we have all this work to do?"

Stella replied, "Don't you understand you have to build all these relationships and deal with the politics at the top?"

Nevertheless, caught up in the need to master enormous numbers of interrelated issues, Monica pressed on. She had set a date for bringing Project Hippocrates to market, and she was determined to meet it. She knew the external competition was getting increasingly tougher, and that it would be a severe strategic blow to HEAL-INC if they missed the deadline.

Over the ensuing several months, a new team, which included many signal processor people, was formed to begin the technology transfer process and overcome all not-invented-here feelings in preparation for a contract with an outside vendor. Parker's people chose not to help specify the features of the digital signal processor. Technical experts from Stella's organization did the work, along with some people from sales and marketing. Exhaustive effort went into design and product specification documents to pave the way for a smoother-than-usual product introduction. During this period, there were vague promises from Parker's organization about modifying the existing analog signal processor to meet the new demands, but nothing tangible happened.

One More Time: Hard Decisions About the Signal Processor

While plans to educate the salesforce went forward, Parker stirred up a great deal of tension around the decision to purchase signal processors. He used every meeting he attended to say negative things about Project Hippocrates. Several important customers even told Monica that Parker and his people had visited them to say that their analog signal processor was being enhanced to adapt to new uses, and that the digital processor that HEAL-INC was thinking of purchasing outside was "a pile of crap."

This immobilized Monica at first, because she couldn't understand how top management could allow this malicious behavior to go on. She got Stella to talk to Dorr about it, but she saw nothing
happen to stop it. Eventually, it just spurred her into redoubling her efforts and pushing her project group to work harder. "I'd have gone crazy if I had paid attention to all that nasty political stuff, so I just poured more energy into the project," she reported later.

As a result of Parker's continued complaining, Dorr formed yet another committee chaired by a new engineering manager, who, because he had recently been hired away from a competitor, was assumed to be unbiased. Unbeknownst to Monica, the new manager began a series of secret meetings involving most of the same people who had been part of Monica's original task force to work on what the criteria should be for making the decision.

Within the next month, the company signed a contract with an outside vendor. Shortly thereafter, Monica learned of the secret study committee and found out it was still evaluating outside purchase. She warned that the company now had a legal obligation and could be sued if it did not go ahead with the new contract.

In spite of her troubles, Monica was proud of the negotiation and the amount of continuing vendor support that she had managed to get the vendor to include in the contract. In fact, her negotiation eventually became a model for the company to purchase components from outside.

Three months after the contract was signed, the "secret" committee announced that it was ready to hear a debate on the merits of the outside digital signal processor versus the existing HEAL-INC analog product. Kane and Monica made presentations.

Another three months went by before the committee announced its decision, which was to go ahead with the outside purchase. Meanwhile, people working on the project were completely confused; they didn't know which side to support. Monica told them to forget politics because there was work to do, but she had to keep encouraging people to get them to do what was needed.

Sudden Death:
Monica Loses Her Position

Two days before a major national meeting, which Monica had organized for HEAL-INC people from around the country to finalize the support strategy for implementing Project Hippocrates, she was called to a meeting with Dan Stella and a new personnel manager. There she was told that she would no longer be managing the program.
Crushed, Monica asked why. Stella told her that the secret committee had recommended that she be replaced by a more technical person, but that he had removed her because he thought she might have a nervous breakdown as a result of all the intensity of her involvement. He believed that she had failed to read the signals he had sent her to slow down, build relationships more, hold back her angry opinions in meetings, and, in general, learn to act "more like a top executive." To him that meant fighting battles off-line rather than in public, and learning to sit quietly through public attacks, even when they were wrong. He told her that as long as she did not understand all of that, there was no place for her in Project Hippocrates. He told her, however, he wanted to keep her on and he gave her some time to think about what her new job might be. For almost a year after that, Monica worked on minor projects as part of Stella's group.

Subsequent events made Monica feel simultaneously vindicated and regretful. Following another eight months of study, the new program manager concluded that Monica's plans were correct; and he proceeded with Project Hippocrates using the innovative strategy Monica had developed for HEAL-INC. Kane was removed from Parker's staff and was having trouble getting anyone in the company to take him on in a new position. The scope of Parker's job was eventually reduced considerably, and he lost control of the most important part of the signal processor design area. And, after a year in limbo, Monica began to acquire significant assignments again. Yet, the way in which the project had lived but the leader of it had been killed off—or at least buried alive for a year—left wounds that still ached; and Monica was determined to learn from her experiences.