THE PATH OF PROJECT SUCCESS

From Failure Analysis to Interpersonal Action

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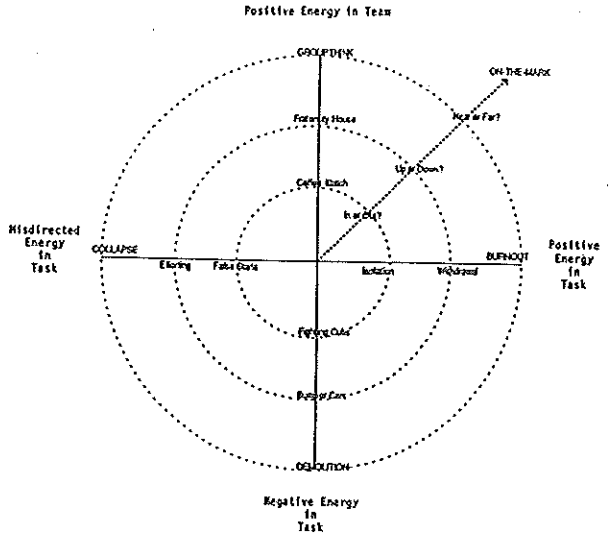
The early warning signals of project failure are often interpersonal, not technical: abandonment by top management, in-fighting among prima donnas, isolation of team members, or the refusal to consider opposing points of view. These signals—if recognized in time—can alert the project manager to the need for specific action. Quick action can bring the project back on course before a major technical problem occurs.

Data about historic project failures can be plotted on a "project management radar" to identify four major wrong directions projects are likely to take: **Collapse, Demolition, Burnout,** and **Groupthink.** Analysis of spectacular project recoveries suggests specific actions to redirect a project toward success.

Think of the energy a project manager invests in a projects moving along two axes. The horizontal axis represents energy invested in the task; the vertical axis represents energy invested in the people.

FIGURE ONE



Adapted with permission from House, Ruth Sizemore. The Human Side of Management. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1988, p. 222.

Figure Two identifies the interpersonal symptoms that a project is headed off track and identifies twelve interpersonal antidotes.

FIGURE TWO

Description of Axes on Project Radar

DIRECTION	GROUPTHINK Highly cohesive state of striving for consensus.	BURNOUT Isolation with depletion of physical and mental resources to attain a goal.	DEMOLITION The result of escalating infighting.	COLLAPSE Out of bounds project behavior.
DANGER	Bad technical decisions	Project failure (from lack of team effort) or the sacrifice of individual team members.	"Explosion" of the team or the project or both.	Collapse of project from its own weight.
SYMPTOMS	Illusion of invulnerability Shared stereotypes Rationalization Illusion of morality Self censorship Mind guarding	Isolation Withdrawal Exhaustion	Blaming within Sarcasm Absence of response Temper explosions Gross overstatement Distortion of information Catastrophizing	False Starts "Efforting" Migrant objectives Out of bounds growth Abandonment
BENCHMARKS	Coffee Klatch Fraternity House	Isolation Withdrawal	Fighting Cubs Bumper Cars	False Starts "Efforting"
ANTIDOTES	Gatekeep. Seek other opinions and information. Follow. Test for consensus.	Gatekeep. Coordinate. Express group feeling. Encourage. Relieve tension.	Encourage. Relieve tension. Mediate. Set standards	Gatekeep. Share information. Coordinate. Diagnose. Set standards. Mediate.

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Figure Three describes the antidotes in more detail.

Figure Three

INTERPERSONAL ANTIDOTES

Seeking Opinion: Looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, suggestions, or ideas.

Coordinating: Showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various subgroups or members.

Summarizing: Pulling together related ideas or suggestions after the group has discussed them.

Encouraging: Being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.

Gatekeeping: Trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, "We haven't heard anything from Jim yet," or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.

Standard Setting: Expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures or in evaluating its decisions, reminding group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

Following: Going along with decisions of the group, thoughtfully accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussion.

Expressing Group Feeling: Summarizing what group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

Diagnosing: Determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, analyzing the main blocks to progress.

Testing for Consensus: tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out whether the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trail balloons to test group opinions.

Mediating: Harmonizing, reconciling different points of view, compromising.

Relieving Tension: Draining off negative feeling by jesting or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in wider context.

Adapted from "Role Functions in a Group," in Handbook for Group Facilitators, La Jolla, CA: University Associates, 1976, pp. 136-137. Original sources are these two classics: NTL/Learning Resources Corp., Handbook of Staff Development and Human Relations Training: Materials Developed for Use in Africa (Revised and Expanded Edition), J. Robert Mitchell, and Anthony Stout, pp. 67-70, 1967. And Morton Deutsch, "The Effects of Cooperation and Competition Upon Group Process". In D. Cartwright & A. Zander, Group Dynamics—Research and Theory. Evanston, Il, Row Peterson & Co., 1960 (2nd Ed.).

Collapse is the result of misdirected energy in the task with little or no attention given to the people in the process. An early indicator is loosely defined or loosely agreed upon scope of work. The project is characterized by false starts, rework, out of bounds growth in scope, cost, and schedule. One of three things is likely to happen:

(1) The project is canceled before completion because of cost and schedule overruns (most likely with internal company projects).

(2) The deliverable suits no one because of the compromises made in an effort to limit overruns.

(3) Somebody, somewhere covers the overruns midst a bloodthirsty search for "the culprit" (or worse.)

Think of a time that you were pressured into pushing forward on a project without the resources or the support you knew it would need to succeed. Perhaps a situation in which someone directed to give a client what you thought they were asking for whether or not it was what you thought they needed. To the far left of the radar by the word "Collapse"—jot down a few words that you would use to describe that project.

Maybe it went like this.

A Project estimated to cost $250,000 and to take nine months, consumed $2.5 million and two years. Then it collapsed of its own weight—it would take another 3 years and $3.6 million to complete.

Projects by their very nature tend toward this direction. When a project manager hears someone say or when he says to himself, "We can't stop now; we've already invested too much in this project!" Look out. He's probably headed this way. From the beginning, the project was probably characterized by false starts. The project manager probably heard over and over again "No, that's not really what I meant," or "Well I don't know how to tell you exactly what I want, but I know that's not it." He wears himself out efforting—investing more and more energy with no apparent result. The project's reputation is for time and cost overruns, not for technical progress. He can't seem to pin down wandering objectives. When he tries to satisfy every eventuality by adding on and adding on, his project grows way out of proportion to his original mission. Key people abandon the team or withhold critical resources, but the project forges ahead—on one leg or, really, on no leg at all.

The telephone service crisis of 1969 seems to fall into this category. In the summer of 1969 failure of the new Electronic Switching Stations (ESS's) in New York City put 10,400 phones out of order during the business day for several weeks. Many analysts attribute the problem to Bell Lab's inattention to a critical resource—input from the field.

There were undeniable signs of collapse as early as 1960. But as one analyst put it"...the project had to go forward; by this time the investment was too great to be sacrificed...." (Brooks, 1975, p. 278)

The Bell System's response was spectacular. William Sharwell, the V.P. responsible for recovery...

* Shared information. He publicly acknowledged that there was, indeed a serious problem. (A fact the President of New York Telephone had denied.)

* Did a lot of gatekeeping. To see to it that information was circulated to the people who could use it, he set up a kind of War Room with participants from AT&T, Bell Labs, and several operating companies.

* Coordinated. He coordinated the efforts of the groups represented in the War Room. In addition, he saw to it that both field and corporate resources were aligned.

* Diagnosed. The technical problem was the failure of the new ESS's to warn when they were about to overload. The interpersonal problem was the breakdown of communication between field technicians at New York Telephone and the engineers at Bell Labs.

* Set new standards. New technical standards specified advance warning of overload.

* Mediated. He mediated differences between field and corporate, between Bell Labs and the operating companies, and between New York Telephone and its customers.

Demolition is the result of misdirected energy invested in the project team with inadequate attention given to the technical aspects of the project. The project is characterized by blaming within the team, temper explosions, and the distortion of information. One of these things is likely to happen.

(1) The project is completed but team members pay a dear cost: reputations are damaged and the stress level is hazardous. Team members may begin a negative history with each other that they carry from project to project—unless they leave the organization entirely.

(2) The project fails and team members vehemently blame each other for the failure.

On the route to demolition, what seemed at first to be playful infighting grows undeniably malicious. Talk among team members is dominated with remarks like "If you ask me, this whole project has been a disaster from the very beginning." "You're going about that all wrong." "Stop trying to stall us again with more of your whining."

Demolition was almost terminal at Chrysler. Iacocca described the interaction this way:

> "Chrysler in 1978 was like Italy in the 1860's—the company consisted of a cluster of little duchies, each one run by a prima donna. It was a bunch of mini-empires with nobody giving a damn about what anybody else was doing." (Iacocca, 1984, 151)

To turn the situation around, Iacocca...

* Encouraged. "I had to tell them what I desperately wanted to believe was true: that if we got the right group together, we could save the company." (170)

* Relieved tension. Bill Cosby provided free entertainment. Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra helped, too. Management chose to laugh instead of cry at Carson's quip: I don't know what's going on over at Chrysler, but it's the first time I ever heard anybody make a conference call to Dial-A-Prayer."

* Mediated. He hired someone to get dealers and Chrysler headquarters to "lower their voices and start listening to each other." (172) He set up a joint UAW-Chrysler Management Quality Program. (175) In 1980, he personally went to every single Chrysler plant to talk directly to workers."

* Set standards. Brought in a financial whiz to set standards for gathering and analyzing financial data and then acting on it. (169) He gave Vice Presidents 6 months to meet other standards. When 33 of the 35 Vice Presidents could not do that, he fired them.

Burnout is the result of a positive investment of energy in the technical task without the needed investment in people. It is most likely when team members participate in a series of relatively short projects driven by pressure to beat a competitor to the market. An early indicator is the withdrawal of team members from each other. Later, abrupt changes in behavior occur: the person who is Mr. or Ms. Sunshine comes in acting like Grumpy several days in a row; the woman who always looks like a page from Vogue comes in looking unkempt day after day; the man who is always early starts coming in late. One of these things is likely to happen:

> (1) The project is completed but the personal cost is very high: turnover rates exceed usual bounds and serious stress related illnesses occur. Uncharacteristic behavior by some team members raises questions about the quality of their decisions and the reliability of their work.
>
> (2) The project isn't able to withstand the turnover, the absences, or the tension. It fails.

Now remember a time when you had to make what someone else described as a minor adjustment that you would describe as a major overhaul. Remember the nights and weekends? Jot down a few adjectives that describe that project by the word "Burnout."

The Soul of a New Machine chronicles the development of a new computer at Data General and the burnout that went along with it. One young engineer, for example, left with no notice other than the note he taped to the prototype machine:

> "I'm going to a commune in Vermont and will deal with no unit of time shorter than a season." (Kidder, 1981, 220)

A project manager should take notice when he sees signs like these:

> * What began with one team member as isolation has now developed into withdrawal. He seems angry all the time, but he doesn't express anger. He listens stonily to the projects manager's suggestions, but he doesn't take them.
>
> * Another team member seems chronically exhausted. She has remarked about her job, "Well, now that I finally have what I wanted, I realize I don't want it anymore." Yet she continues to overdo the work until she can't do it at all—until she seems immobilized by either fatigue or discouragement.

The advice of an eighty-five year old woman is a classic antidote:

> "If I had it to do over....If I had my life to live over, I would dare to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would be sillier, I would take fewer things seriously. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones. You see, I'm one of those people who have lived seriously and sanely hour after hour, day after day, I've been one of those persons who never went any place without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do again, I'd travel lighter." (Kushner, 1986,)

People who burn out use themselves up for the project. The project manager is as vulnerable as team members. These tips to protect yourself are not on the chart so you may want to add them at the bottom of the column. Have interests outside of work; do something at work or at home that produces a tangible product you can be proud of or enjoy; have a close relationship with someone who gives you moral support; stay physically healthy.

To help a group, the project manager can....

> * Gatekeep. Be sure members of your group are getting messages from the outside world and sending some back.
>
> * Coordinate. Refer often to the big picture and show how individual contributions fit together:

"Great, Jack, This is just what Ken needs to get around that vibration problem. Please talk with him this morning and then get back with me after lunch."

> * Express group feeling.

"I know it's frustrating to spend so much time hashing out one detail."

> * Encourage.
>
> * Relieve tension. One office full of history buffs celebrate little-recognized historic events:
>
> -the anniversary of the Battle of Hastings. (October 14, 1066)

- the day a popular soft drink was introduced as an esteemed "Brain Tonic and Intellectual Beverage." (March 29,1886)

- the anniversary of the first recorded use of the fork. (Venice, 1071)

Groupthink is the result of positive energy invested in the team without adequate attention given to the task. It is more typical of high-level managerial decisions than it is of decisions at the technical project level. Early indicators are smugness and underestimation of "the competition" (or outsiders). Later, the team is virtually isolated from information that is "Not Invented Here." One of these things is likely to happen:

(1) The project fails before it is released to the customer (the sooner the better). Team members blame "them" for the failure.

(2) The project is released to the customer and then fails (the more frightening alternative.)

Groupthink is the project direction least likely to occur at the operating level : it is much more likely to occur among top management. But...when remarks like these keep cropping up, your group could be headed for Groupthink.

"Since Cartwright objects so much, let's just leave him out of it. He can't possibly understand what we're trying to do anyway."

"If we weren't right, we wouldn't feel so good about it."

One of the most memorable products of Groupthink was the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In the spring of 1961, recently inaugurated President John Kennedy reluctantly approved U.S. support for an attack on Cuba by an exile army. The attack was ill-conceived, ill-disguised, and ill-timed. The United States expected support from anti-Castro Cubans still on the island; no one gave support. The United States expected people to believe the bombers which had recently flown over Cuba were the planes of Cuban deserters; no one believed it. The United States expected Cubans to be surprised by the actual assault; no one was surprised. The April 17, 1961, Bay of Pigs fiasco is considered by most historians to be the darkest hour of John Kennedy's career.

In the fall of 1962, Kennedy ordered that all ships carrying offensive weapons to Cuba be turned back by the U.S. fleet. His action was squarely based on reliable information that Cuba was building a network of missile bases, was constructing new airfields, was uncrating Soviet jet bombers. The United States hoped that Soviet ships would turn back without a direct attack on the U.S. quarantine; the Soviet ships turned back. The October 22-28, 1962, Cuban missile crisis is considered by most historians to be the brightest hour of John Kennedy's career.

Now think of a project that was practically perfect in every way. How many of your strategies did Kennedy use?

* He served as gatekeeper. He made it clear that he wanted all alternatives explored.

* He sought other opinions and information. He brought in outside consultants.

* He followed. He avoided direct leadership—even absented himself from some of the discussions.

* He tested for consensus. He asked each group member to be a critical evaluator.

To keep a project on target, the project manager needs to balance positive energy invested in the task with positive energy invested in the people. He must move toward his picture of success and at the same time watch for early indications of failure. Often these early indicators are interpersonal signals a project is headed for Collapse, Demolition, Burnout, or Groupthink. Responding with an appropriate combination of these behaviors can redirect the project toward success: Seeking opinions, coordinating, summarizing, encouraging, gatekeeping, standard setting, following, expressing group feeling, diagnosing, testing for consensus, and relieving tension.

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