

Expect Chaos

Sue Dyer

Man has sought to forecast the future since time immemorial. Can you imagine how the cave man must have looked upon the landscape to try and predict where his next meal might appear, or his next threat? Astrologers, fortune-tellers, economists and meteorologists all try to offer up “predictability” over what is to come. The problem with predicting the future is that we are at each moment, and with each effort, changing it forever!

The opening of Hong Kong’s new airport provided a great example of what happens when seemingly small events join together to produce a large, catastrophic effect.



■ The first flight was due in at 6:30 am. The airport authorities were exhausted from their efforts to move to the new airport over night.

■ Around 8:00 am a number of passengers had trouble finding and retrieving their luggage. The Flight Information Display boards were blank or displaying incorrect information. To compensate, whiteboards were put up, resulting in crowds mingling around the whiteboards. People coming to meet arriving passengers could not find their gates or determine their time of arrival; departing passengers had similar problems.

■ In the meantime passengers were not provided the boarding gate numbers that are normally printed on boarding passes. So the whiteboards become more important and harder to access. The same lack of information effected the airline staff who didn’t know where to report for duty.

■ Arriving aircraft experienced delays in having a gate assigned or a place to wait while a gate was located. Things began to back up as planes arrived but did not leave on time. Parked planes were sent steps and busses to unload passengers. After getting off the plane passengers waited two to three hours for their baggage...if it could be found.

■ Three Ramp Handling Operators were to take care of departure, arrival and transfer of bags. But when they had to go get baggage off the planes there was no information on which carousel the bags were to be assigned. The baggage handling system could not read some of the tags. This led to around 6,000 bags lying around the baggage claim area.

■ When passengers, and those meeting them, were stranded for hours in the terminal, they turned to the telephones. They found that many of the public phones were not working. Cell phones didn’t work because the network was overloaded. The air-conditioning did not function properly and toilets were filthy and some overflowing due to the overcrowding. Certain escalators did not work so people had to walk up stairs to find overcrowded restaurants filled with overflowing garbage bins.

■ Cargo did not fare well either. Hundreds, if not thousands, of pallets containing cargo occupied the ramp area making it difficult to locate and remove specific items.

And you thought you have had bad days! It is not an exaggeration to say that the airport was in pandemonium for several days. So how in the heck can we begin to predict and manage complex organizations and complex projects so that they don’t “crash and burn”? The answer may lie in learning how *to manage chaos*. Here are some tips:

Tip #1: Know Things Will Get Off Course and Make Course Corrections

When NASA sends a rocket into space it is only on target 5% of the time. The other 95% it gyros back and forth toward its target. When the rocket veers off course (which is most of the time), you can bet that is it not a surprise to NASA. They have feedback mechanisms that tell them where the rocket is at any given moment so they can make course corrections. What kind of feedback or accountability system do you have for your projects or organizational initiatives? A monthly *Project Scorecard* offers regular feedback and allows you to take the “pulse” of the project/initiative, then you can make course corrections to assure that you hit your target(s).

Tip #2: Tap Into The Collective Wisdom of Your Team

Having worked with over 1,000 project teams, I have seen first hand, and trust explicitly, that there is a “collective wisdom” in a team. This wisdom is available to help you to know what is needed to succeed, to know how to solve the problems that you face, to help you continuously improve. The wisdom is

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there if you ASK. Many project managers or leaders don't ask because they feel they are "supposed to" have all of the answers and don't want to show weakness. The truth is that we see problems only from our own perspective. Problems usually have many facets that we simply don't see. Your team, focused on solving your problem, can offer breakthrough ideas that will make you the hero. This is especially true for large or complex problems where knowledge resides in many different people.

Tip #3:
Maintain A Strategic Vantage Point

When you are down in the trenches all you can see is what is in front of you, behind you, and the walls of the trench. It is impossible to steer your team to success from this vantage point. I remember visiting the island of Santorini in Greece. Up on the highest cliff they had carved marble "viewing" benches into the side of the mountain. From there they could see in all directions. They could see any threats that might be approaching from land or sea. They could see someone who might need help. They could tell how life was proceeding in the village. In order to steer your team toward success you must have a strategic vantage point. This means you can't be in the trenches. Many times I see leaders and project managers getting lost in the details of a specific issue or requirement and losing their direction. When this happens they can't steer their team, nor can they see the impending crisis.

Tip #4:
A Two-Headed Cow Doesn't Know Which Way To Go

Have you ever driven past a pasture of cows grazing on a hill? Have you ever noticed that they all face the same direction? They are a herd. They move as one unit. What would happen if there was a **two** headed cow leading the herd? It would see two different paths and have two different ideas for how to proceed. How would it ever decide on what direction to go? While this analogy may seem absurd, many teams with two or more leaders are being led in many directions at the same time. I also see many projects with NO discernable leader. There is no one in charge, no one who is the visionary, no one who has the authority to resolve the problems. Impending chaos is only part of the problem. This lack of leadership also creates "entropy", meaning that instead of *synergy* you are actually losing momentum and wasting resources.

Chaos happens. It is a product of nature and will always happen. The larger the project or initiative, the more chaos will be created. You can't manage these efforts in the same manner as you have in the past. You must seek out new ways to take the "vital signs" of your project at regular intervals so that you can wrap your mind around the entire project, or initiative, and steer it toward success.

- Know Things Will Get Off Course and Make Course Corrections
- Tap Into the Collective Wisdom of Your Team
- Maintain a Strategic Vantage Point
- A Two-Headed Cow Doesn't Know Which Way to Go

Sue Dyer is the founder and president of the International Partnering Institute, a non-profit educational organization that offers certifications in professional partnering facilitation and partnering competencies. Sue is also president of OrgMetrics, a consulting firm specializing in partnering facilitation and non-adversarial approaches to resolving disputes. To find out more, please contact Sue at suedyer@orgmet.com or 925 449-8300. You can visit us on the web at www.partneringinstitute.com and www.orgmet.com



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