

## Clean Up Your Own Mess



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*He was a short, medium build Mexican. He had jet-black hair, graying slightly at the sides. His neatly ironed kaki colored shirts and work pants had pronounced creases. He always had a smile on his face and always seemed happy. It was as if he was above and beyond the circumstances of his daily toil.*

*His name was on a label on his shirt: Manuel. We called him Mr. Manny and he was always working-- never at a furious pace, but steady. Concentrating so much on the task at hand he could ignore all the kids swirling around him if he needed to, but never so much that he didn't have a warm smile for us at an opportune moment.*

*He would do anything: sweeping, plumbing, changing light bulbs, and waxing floors. He obviously enjoyed kids. Only later did it occur to me that he might have had children or grandchildren at the school. I never knew. But work was work and he admired all of us from afar. Maybe he appreciated education more than most people. Maybe he understood a role can be important, even if it is a small role.*

*Usually there was glitter or pieces of construction paper on the floor by the end of the school day in my kindergarten classroom. Extraneous white glue was always left on the chairs and tables when we left class. But by the next morning Mr. Manny would have set everything right again.*

*I remember once knocking over a tray of watercolors. We had been painting at the tables and I was concentrating on my masterpiece. We were cleaning out our brushes in the community water jar. I guess I was concentrating so much on my artwork that I hadn't noticed the jar had mysteriously moved toward the edge of the table, when I elbowed it to the floor. Luckily, I didn't break the jar. Miss Waters sprinted from where*

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*she had been helping someone, to the towel dispenser, and then to the spill. When she realized the water had spread quite a long way across the floor, she told me to get a mop from Mr. Manny.*

*I went down to the janitors' room where Mr. Manny was working on something. I told him what had happened and he just gave me a slight, knowing smile. He must have seen this scene a million times. He pulled over a bucket on wheels that was already filled with soapy water and a mop (hum, well prepared. This must occur frequently.). Without saying much, I walked behind him as he pushed the mop to the back of the room where all my classmates had been prior to my accident. They had gone on to other work and left the scene of the crime.*

*I began to join my classmates. After all, Mr. Manny had his job and I had mine. Surely he could finish that little job in no time. He caught me by the collar and asked, "Where are you going? You have to clean up your own mess." He handed me the mop and stood by while I mopped the floor to his satisfaction (well, somewhat). He pointed out spots that needed greater attention. When I finished, I returned to the front of the room and he rolled the bucket away. That may have been the most important lesson I learned that day: "You have to clean up your own mess."*

eBusiness is no different. You have to clean up your own mess. In the high pressure created by the "get it done" attitude of today's business climate we often rush off to the next project and the next activity. When we have done something wrong, for example, designing a process incorrectly, we sometimes just move on to the next project. We need to bear in mind that we can leave a large wake behind us.

Frequently, it takes months for us to discover that what we have put in place isn't quite right. Maybe we haven't clearly understood what the customer wanted. Maybe the "mock-up" didn't quite live up to customer expectations. Maybe we didn't test for a certain way the customer was going to use the tool. That often happens where we haven't fully appreciated the workflow the customer will be using. It also happens when the customer process changes as a result of the new tool: "I was going to use the packing memo for input. But then I realized that I could just as easily enter the data at the receiving dock itself. In order to do that the layout needs to be changed a bit."

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**Use post-implementation validation.** When giving a speech, we are often told: “Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.” With a twist, that is pretty good advice in determining whether your work has stayed on course. “Tell them what you are going to do. Do it. Ask them if you did what you said you were going to do.”

It is essential they you tell them clearly and specifically what you intend to do and when. You need to tell them in very general terms what you intend to do over the next six months or so. Advise them of what limitations you already have seen and the concerns that you have with the schedule as well. Then tell them specifically what you are going to be doing in the next project. This needs to be as specific as possible.

Leave them with documentation, conceptual drawings, project timelines, and use case materials where appropriate. Tell them the roadblocks that are ahead of you. If appropriate, ask for specific help, such as in piloting or in further review work. Listen specifically for their concerns and don't be surprised if their concerns are not your concerns and if they don't have issues with the problems that are keeping you awake at night.

As you do your project, keep them abreast of your progress and how your timeline may be shifting. Explain the reasoning behind any shifts in date or functionality. It is important that they be crystal clear as to when they need to participate and what is expected of both of you. This is still building the foundation and helping define what it is that you will be delivering. In essence, this will define even “if” you have a mess. It is the blueprint against which you will come to conclusion in cleaning up your mess.

If you do not have this blueprint ready, additional functionality can slip into your design. These can be features you don't wish to create or are not ready to create. “Oh, I thought it was going to work such and such way.”

There are two types of errors that can creep into your project: 1) errors of design and development, and 2) errors of understanding.

Finally, as you stabilize your application, plan on evaluating your success from your trading partners' viewpoint. Ask them if it met their needs and if it does what it was intended to do. If you have done a good job telling them what you are going to do and executing against the plan, there should be few surprises. Sometimes you will need to

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do some mopping up. The application may not perform the way everyone thought it would. It may take longer to complete certain tasks or appear on the web page in an unexpected fashion. This can certainly happen with the wide variety of browsers that are in use and the various ways they handle language standards.

This post-implementation validation can also help identify follow-on features that will enhance the users experience and better support the business process. But it is mandatory that you view those suggested changes in the context of the original use case. Otherwise, once again you run the risk of adding additional complexity or building features that are outside the intent of the original design.

Don't just send out surveys to attempt to collect this information. You want to collect this feedback in person where possible. This allows you to see the body language and drive deeper than is otherwise possible. The added bonus is that if you do this in person and you have had a spectacular success you get to receive the congratulations in a more personal way. This helps cement your trading partner relationship, builds trust, and propels you forward toward the next successful project.

**Think about production support requirements early.** It is easier to clean your mess if you have the mop and bucket ready. In the struggle to get job aids, training materials, and the like in place for your start-up, it is important to sort out who will be responsible for production support and what types of support they will provide. It is not always clear how the "hand offs" will take place and how production problems will be tracked and managed.

If you don't want to embarrass yourself in front of your customers, work through these during your application-testing phase. Perform "dry runs" of production support. Start by asking yourself the question, "Who will know about the problem first and who should they contact?" This will lead to additional questions, such as what additional training is required, what tools should be used, and how problems will escalate.

Map out how the problems will be handled and passed as they go from "generic" problems (such as who the trading partner contacts for questions) to technically specific (i.e., "level 3" type of support).

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Finally, confirm with your trading partners before start-up if this type of support will meet their needs. Publish appropriate documents (web pages, flow diagrams, etc.) and refresh these documents using scheduled, periodic reviews.

**Plan on rework.** Think of rework as the natural sequence of things. Clean up is merely continuous work improvement. The Sistine Chapel needs a touch up every once in a while. Michelangelo doesn't seem to mind.

As part of the budgeting process, we need to plan for re-work.

If you have a plan in place for cleaning up your own mess, the problems you encounter will not seem as dire. You will know the steps to go through and will have confidence that you will be able to bring the resources to bear to resolve them quickly and efficiently. Not being prepared can become a stumbling block to your overall effort. The sense of urgency (or outright panic) will draw away resources for the more important, long range projects that you are working on. It will defocus your effort and increase the probability that those future projects will also struggle.

When you make a mess (and you will) be prepared to clean it up.

*The urgent problems are seldom the important ones. – Dwight D. Eisenhower*



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