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Sometimes Things Go Wrong

I hated it when it rained at school. We would shift to “rainy day schedule.” Whose idea was that? Afraid we were going to get wet and melt? Recesses were cancelled so we couldn’t go outside to play. Though we played in the classroom, it just wasn’t the same. It wasn’t the physical release of energy that we all seemed to need. Not sufficiently rambunctious for my tastes.

One afternoon, in the middle of January, it began to hail. We lived near Los Angeles and hail there is rare. Some of the kids in our class had seen snow before and a few had experienced hail, but this was the first time I remember having seen such a thing. Someone explained to us that it was frozen rain. Amazing!

We became aware of the hail because of the noise. It no longer sounded like the strong rain we had been hearing during the last few days. It sounded like rock salt was being poured onto our roof and thrown onto the large windows. We had been sitting on the floor in the center of the classroom doing some quiet activity. When it began to hail, we just sat there looking at each other, not knowing what was happening. I don’t recall the teacher saying anything to us. But in an explosion of excitement we all ran to the windows to see what was happening. It was a small stampede to the windows at the side of the room, where there were display tables and open storage bins, to see what was making all that noise. The hail was hitting the ground so hard it was literally bouncing a foot high! Some of the boys jumped onto the table to get a better view and knocked some things over. The hail looked like kernels of popcorn exploding everywhere. As quickly as the hail had come, it subsided. The noise turned from “salt” back to rain. Regaining control, Miss Waters began herding us back to the center of the classroom.

It was then that I noticed what appeared to be soapy water on the floor. And then I saw the broken plastic pieces. Reassembling the pieces together in my mind, I recognized what it was. I had brought a dome to class that day to share. I had received it as a Christmas present and was eager to show it off. It had been made of clear, white, and blue plastic and inside you could see the scene of a woodsman's cottage and a forest of tall pine trees. You turned the dome upside down and small plastic flakes fell into the top of the dome. When you righted the dome, it gave the appearance of snow slowly falling as the flakes descended through soapy water inside the dome.

If I had only given it to my teacher when class began, like my mom had told me. If only I had foreseen what could have happened.

Not noticing the damage (or the mess) Miss Waters announced it was time for "Show and Tell." Probably because I had been so excited about what I had to share, she called on me first. There I stood, having lost a Christmas present, with a mess on the floor, and nothing to share. I was heartbroken.

Things go wrong. That's part of life. We all know it. We all experience business disappointment. Actually, business is full of disappointments-- large and small. If you want a "wake-up call," take a look at the statistics on businesses that fail each year. Think how many of them were eBusinesses. The "death of the dot-coms" has almost become a modern day business lexicon for an imprudent, overly optimistic, failed, opportunistic investment (at its best) and greed, cupidity, and avarice (at its worst).

With eBusiness projects we have been pioneering in many ways. We have pioneered the technology and we have pioneered the finances. Many of us have worked through the first business cases on eBusiness projects at our companies. We have struggled and debated the benefits and ultimately accepted the challenges of "making it happen"—on both sides of the ledger.

We have engaged others in helping them to see our vision. We have accepted the helm of steering the ship through dangerous waters, when management waived or gave it lip service, to what we knew in our hearts was the right course.

Frequently we make an emotional investment. The B2B projects become "our babies." I remember the day we received our first B2B web orders when I couldn't

control my tears. My colleagues had spent the last few months of hard work to get the application all put together and tested, and they were thrilled to see it evolve. But for me it marked the culmination of six years' effort of taking it from "idea on paper" to "application on web." Many of us have enjoyed the great satisfaction of seeing our plans come to fruition.

But for many of us our B2B projects, especially our first one, run into problems. We haven't yet learned where the unexpected bumps will be. We haven't been careful with some things. We didn't know we had to be careful! We are giving it our best shot, but we just "don't know what we don't know." Those "emotional investments" come with a personal price.

It is not as hard as it seems to anticipate problems. The best way to start anticipating problems is to get the conversation going with your team and identifying their concerns. This can be done in a brainstorming session. An independent, third party can facilitate it if you wish. This is particularly important if you may be part of the problem. Even if you don't perceive yourself to be part of the problem, however, it is never a bad idea to have the brainstorming session facilitated. It gives you a chance to participate more fully and to take detailed notes of the conversations and exchange of views. You can also probe for understanding in a different way, such as asking questions in such a way that it helps the facilitator who is "scribing" problems on a flip chart gain a better understanding. You can concentrate on ideas instead of penmanship.

If your management style hasn't been participatory or particularly open in the past, this is a way to break through to a more creative work environment.

Perform risk assessments for each project. Having completed some brainstorming to anticipate problems, your next task will be to do a risk assessment for your project. You may have thought that the brainstorming was your risk assessment, but it was not. What you will have is a collection of "hopes and fears." You will have a jumble of potential problems.

Some will be issues with which you have to deal, like how the team is communicating, which may have little bearing on risk. Some things from your brainstorming you will find could never occur. Other things will be so minor that they

pose no real risk. They aren't to be taken lightly and just laughed off; they may be sincere concerns by members of the team that, in fact, pose no immediate threat to this particular project. The last items that should not be included are items that are outside of your company's control or sphere of influence (such as the stock markets collapse, wars, catastrophic weather).

Other things from your brainstorming will have a direct bearing. These are the ones on which to concentrate with a risk assessment.

There are a few, fundamental questions and answers that you need to identify:

- In a few words, what is the issue or problem?
- How likely is this problem to occur? (On a scale from 1-low to 10-high).
- If you don't mitigate the risk and the problem does occur, how severe would it be? (On a scale from 1-low to 10-high).
- Identify (crisply) three things that need to be done to mitigate the risk. These have to be realistic actions, which are sufficiently "resourced" (people, money, tools, time) to be complete in the timeframe needed.
- Identify who will be responsible for mitigating the risk (one and only one person for each of the three things needed to mitigate).
- Identify dates when the risk will be mitigated and dates for key milestones (one or more for each of the three things needed to mitigate).
- If you do all the mitigation actions, by the dates identified, what is the likelihood the problem will still occur? (On a scale from 1-low to 10-high. 8-10 should be showstoppers to the project going forward).
- If you do all the mitigation actions, by the dates identified, what is the likelihood the problem will be catastrophic or significant? (On a scale from 1-low to 10-high. 5 and above should give management "acid indigestion.")

Mitigate means "to make milder;" it doesn't mean to make go away. We typically don't have sufficient resources to make the entire potential problem or all our problems disappear. But we can anticipate and plan to make them milder and survivable.

Like with my woodman's dome, through this process you can place what's important in the hands of people who care. You can take the advice of those around you who have more or different experience, like the advice my mother had given me.

You vividly demonstrate the concern you have and the importance this issue has for your company.

You can identify the risk, put the answers to the above questions into a spreadsheet, and monitor them as your project progresses. You may choose to post these on a bulletin board or discuss them frequently at your team meetings. Make these visible and constant on your mind.

Write “broken scenarios” into your use case or business plan. If you write use cases for your projects, you can document secondary, exception, and alternative scenarios to cover the handling of planned alternate routes. In these you identify planned exceptional events or choices that a user may follow. That works fine for application process design and some user aids (“cheat sheets” and “job aids”).

But for other unplanned events you will want to identify “broken scenarios.” In these you can document unplanned activities and events that can and do periodically occur for which you will not have a specific alternative path and design (but where you can provide a bit of direction). They are “broken” from the standpoint that they cannot be documented to the last detail and usually not even to a conclusion point (nor should they). But they can provide valuable insights into the business process.

For example, let’s say you are running a grocery store. You might have a use case that describes how you scan items at the cash register and another on how you key in the prices at the cash register. You might have secondary, exception, and alternative scenarios to handle things like missing price information, items broken at the cash register, credit card processing, etc. The list of alternative paths can go on and on and you can document the typical use case to follow the process for handling each one. At some point, all of the above will happen and may happen every day in the course of running your grocery store.

You should also write a “broken scenario” for if the electricity is interrupted. When that occurs, your concern shifts from the checkout process to one of security, safety, and restoration. Your case may be conditional, based on the time of day it occurs. Near closing may be different from the middle of the day.

Writing “broken scenarios” can provide valuable insights and raise interesting questions that you may be able to incorporate in your design: “Should I have flashlights

at the register?” or “Do I need uninterrupted power supply?” This thought process is highly transferable to our B2B applications.

If you don't write use cases, consider documenting this in your business planning activities. These can be valuable materials to help in production support and in system recovery.

Anticipating problems allows us to circumvent them where possible. If I had thought my globe could have been broken, maybe I would of taken my mother's advice more seriously.

But even when we cannot get around our problems entirely, anticipating the implications and starting the recovery as soon as possible can be helpful.

"The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem." -Theodore Rubin



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