MURPHY'S OUT THERE...

There are many opportunities to get things wrong in projects. Murphy's Law suggests, that if you momentarily take your eye off the ball, that's the moment it will go wrong.

Over the last 10 years, it appears to us that the governance and reporting of corporate projects has improved dramatically. While things are by no means perfect, there are far fewer disasters than in the old days, even though the nature of projects and their touch-points into the organisation have become much more complex.

While conducting Engagement and Team Building workshops, we discuss issues with hundreds of project participants each year. We are consistently surprised at the regularity with which one of the key links between project and business is under prepared for the critical role they face.

What is less well recognised is the critical role that these representatives have in promoting the virtue of the new systems to their colleagues back in the business. In effect they are the project's "salesforce" to its ultimate customers.

In the project they are often referred to as SMEs (Subject Matter Experts). Their expertise lies with the business unit that will be the end recipient of the output of the project; be it a new system, process model or whatever. Their critical role is to help the project staff to understand the requirements of the business, and ensure that the finished output of the project is relevant and usable and meets the requirements of the end users.

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they are the project's "salesforce" to its ultimate customers. It appears to us that many of these SMEs have not even recognised that this is part of their role. Others, it would appear, are ill-equipped to carry out that role effectively. This sounds like a great opportunity for Murphy to do his worst. If performed well, this role can ensure that the end users are looking forward with enthusiasm to cut-over day. They will feel assured by the positive reports that have been shared by their colleagues, seconded to the project.

BREIFING

Clearly it would be a good idea to make it clear to the SMEs, when seconded to the project, the full extent of their role, and the critical impact that their communication with their erstwhile colleagues will have (either positive or negative). This might avoid the situation observed in more than one ERP implementation where SMEs were networking over drinks with their business unit colleagues on Friday evenings, and sharing all the disasters of the week on the project, and humorously describing the debacle for all of us when we eventually try to go live. We all understand that projects are really hard, and by their nature, things will go wrong and will need to be fixed as we go. But to undermine the user community confidence with every glitch is clearly not helpful.

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TEMPERAMENT

The selection process for the Subject Matter Experts can vary tremendously. The 'project' will often be offered those whose absence from "Business as Usual" will make the least impact. Sounds like the "B team" to me. Is that who we need as the ambassadors for our new, bright, shiny system? Clearly we need to select based on knowledge and experience, yet we should also consider the temperament of potential candidates.

Some technically minded people, have a great eye for detail and a desire for perfection, are good at following process. They are excellent at seeing the flaw in the plan and can clearly add value within the project. But are these the types of people that you would choose as your ambassadors for the new world? People with these traits also tend to be conservative in approach, pessimistic (glass half full) potentially introverted with small social networks, and very reserved in their praise for anything. They see the flaws first, and will never give full marks "because nothing is perfect".

To bring the users on the journey, I think I might be seeking ambassadors who are confident, extrovert individuals, with broad social networks, people with energy, enthusiasm, optimism, who enjoy sharing their view, even if they are a little less discerning about the details (potentially another plus).

SKILLS & TECHNIQUES

Experienced project staff may have dozens of projects under their belt - 'Been there, done that, its just common sense'. "The problem with common sense," my Grandfather used to tell me "is that its not all that common". If we pull staff out of the business to become SMEs on our project, many may be experiencing project life for the first time. We can either help them to assimilate, or let them sink or swim (taking the project aspirations with them).

Communication around projects can become *robust* when task based milestones are at risk. The resulting stress can cause all sort of unintended consequences. There are many examples: taking short cuts to meet onerous schedules; lack of listening, too much authority with insufficient Influence, plenty of telling without enough listening, focus on task completion rather than outcomes... and did I mention not enough listening?

With the best of intent, stressed project staff can be perceived by others as arrogant. You've probably met some yourself. They would be shocked to hear that. It certainly was not their intent. They were just trying to get the job done on time, on budget, etc, etc. It's very hard though, to get cooperation from potential users when you are perceived as arrogant.

The stakeholder engagement techniques covered in the 3 day Engagement Skills Workshop, can equip all project staff with the ability to make a difference. For the SMEs there is an even greater win, as they will require the influencing skills as the ambassador for the project among their user colleagues, as well as in the project team.

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CONCLUSION

If you leave things up to Murphy, things will go wrong. The ultimate success of the project can hinge on how well the users are brought on the journey. Proactive selection, briefing and equipping of these key individuals, might just give your project that extra 2% that gets it across the line.

Foot note: Murphy's Law: Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.