A Guy Named Murphy

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Doing nothing is an acceptable response to potential project threats that are deemed relatively insignificant or highly unlikely to occur. But what do you do when risk mitigation activities have been curtailed and that improbable problem does indeed arrive? Communication and calm are critical, according to these project management experts.

London Mayor Boris Johnson was widely criticized recently for the city's failure to keep public services operational during the worst snowfall the United Kingdom's capital had seen for 20 years. Why were there no buses? Simple — the mitigation activity required to prepare for the atypical amount of snow was deemed too significant.

Widely accepted risk management theory says that doing nothing is an appropriate response to some risks. But what happens on a project when you've done no risk mitigation and then the risk materializes?

"When you are running a large project and have already passed the project planning phase, the project manager's core role is managing the performance of people, meeting plan expectations, and assessing the threats to project success," say Tim Pare and John Kirkwood, managing consultants at PA Consulting Group. "From a practical point of view, there are always a ton of these threats and there is seldom time available to spend on things that have a low likelihood. It is probably more often the case that risk mitigation activities are curtailed, or not enacted at all, rather than pursued for too long."

Lisa Anderson, president of LMA Consulting Group, also believes that there's a natural stop to risk management activity. "I've led project teams, it is common to have unexpected events and challenges arise. [But] once you have established an effective project team and defined a critical path, stop risk mitigation activity, as it will be a waste of time and resources," she says.

In fact, these unexpected events are par for the course in project management. "If you have been a PM for any length of time you have run into problems on your projects — especially if they are IT or technology related," says Bruce McGraw, CEO of Cognitive Technologies, a professional services firm delivering project and program management services, products and PMO tool implementation to commercial and government clients. "In fact, we blame these problems on a guy named 'Murphy' which has led to the whole field of risk management, where we try to think of all the things that can go wrong before a project starts. The first step in addressing the worst case is to determine that you have a problem. That is not always as simple as it seems."

Johanna Rothman, author of Manage It! Your Guide to Modern, Pragmatic Project Management, agrees. As a consultant, she was brought in to help resolve a crisis on a development project where nothing was working and everything had been tried. "[The] project was slipping a week every week," Rothman says. "The PM had no idea what to do. The project team had no idea. They were trying to integrate a piece of hardware and software, and it wasn't working."

Rothman established that the problem they thought they had — no more options — wasn't actually the real problem. "The developers had been saying 'We've tried everything' but they hadn't. The testers were saying 'We've tested everything' but they hadn't. I had them build a matrix of everything they'd tried and the results they'd gotten. Once they realized there were holes in the matrix where things hadn't been tried, they knew how long those tasks would take and we would have another chance to reassess after those tasks were done."

The first step in being able to deal with the 'snowstorm' on your project is to establish what the problem actually is. Any number of issues could arise for which you have done no risk mitigation activity as you thought the likelihood of it occurring was just too small. For example, a supplier could go out of business or a key building or data center could flood or burn down.

When you know what you are dealing with you then need to swing into action. Anderson has a three-point plan: "First, it starts with people," she says. "Immediately bring the project team together to understand the situation in order to brainstorm and develop plans."

Then she advises reviewing the project schedule. "Will the unexpected circumstances affect the critical path? If not, rework a solution and remain steadfastly focused on the critical path. If yes, utilize the team to brainstorm and develop alternative critical path options."

Finally, she believes it is critical to ensure that the communication channels are in place so that everyone knows what's going on. "Ensure the critical changes to the project plans are communicated with clear next steps, project milestones and with accountabilities assigned. The only time it is too soon to communicate to the organization or relevant sponsors is before the project team is in the loop."

You do need to recognize that you can't fix the problem by yourself. Your team is going to be key to sorting it out. However, the project team won't respond well to a panicky project manager.

"The leader's message has to be realistic, but positive," say Susan Bloch and Philip Whiteley, authors of How to Manage in a Flat World. "The team needs a narrative, and a feeling of confidence that someone is in charge. So, you tell the team the truth about the situation, but not in a way that spreads gloom and pessimism. If people discover the seriousness of a crisis from other sources and feel you have lied to them, they will not trust you again, but the leader needs to look at the situation in a positive way and chart a way out of the crisis."

Pare and Kirkwood agree. "In times of hardship, strong project leadership is critical to make decisive, quick actions and inspire confidence," they say. "Keep communication transparent: not just when the risk has hit, but all through the project. Too often communication is a one-way upwards path and staff are kept in the dark. Opening up the project results in fewer surprises, greater trust and the chance for potential solutions from the front line to filter upwards."

"The most critical elements of communicating successfully include a brief description of the obstacle, immediately followed with a clear plan and/or options being evaluated to correct the situation," says Anderson. "In essence, when you convey confidence backed with specific steps, it typically eliminates the chaos."

When things are panicky, emotions play a much greater part in decision-making and the project

process: team members could be worried about losing their jobs, for example. Normally, layering on emotion makes things worse, so as a project manager, offer reassurances where you can and try to avoid being drawn in to emotional debates that don't help solve the immediate problems.

Rothman believes that too often communications muddy the waters instead of clarifying the current situation or the perceived issue. "Exposing data and making data-based decisions is key," she says. "If you break the work down into small chunks, make the data transparent so everyone can see where everyone is, you have a chance of avoiding a project crisis. Or, if you have one, resolving it."

Pare and Kirkwood also advise homing in on the benefits. "In times of crisis, it is easy to forget that the project is not an end to itself, but a means to realize some return. Revisiting the business case and recalculating the return will help refocus efforts or potentially make you realize the project is no longer viable and should be stopped."

It's important to make a decision quickly, whether you decide that the project should be stopped as the business case is no longer viable, or that the project can continue in a revised form. If your project team is large, consider assigning a small group to work through the issues rapidly, or change the way you manage the project temporarily: for example, have daily stand-up meetings or conference calls until your mitigation plans and reschedules are in place.

So, knowing that it's highly possible that you'll face a disaster, should you try to plan for it anyway? "It is wiser to invest in the development of a general process to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity rather than trying to be prepared for singular situations," says Dr Guido Quelle, managing partner at Mandat Managementberatung in Germany. "It is impossible to be prepared for every risk."

Bloch and Whiteley believe that the most effective risk mitigation activity is developing high levels of trust. "There can be a tendency in project management to look primarily at the logistics and objectives, and regard relationships as the 'soft' stuff," they say. "Investment in establishing trust, bolstered by regular and effective communication, is more likely to create resilient teams that can cope with unexpected events, large or small."

A strong sense of team morale goes a long way to creating an environment where problems are raised early and can be dealt with successfully. A non-blame culture can encourage issue sharing and buy you a precious few days or hours in heading off unforeseen disasters.

"It helps to take time to get to know the team members wherever they are located — especially if team members are from diverse backgrounds — and ensure that there are strong processes in place for decision- making and problem-solving," say Bloch and Whiteley. "All project leaders should ensure that there is regular open and transparent communication; they should listen to what others say and feel, including where technology is the main means of communicating. They also need to build accountability, values, norms of behaviour and trust."

"When things do go belly up, the team is in a strong position under good leadership to right themselves."

Elizabeth Harrin has lived through a couple of 'worst ever' scenarios on projects. Her book, Project Management in the Real World, is stuffed with case studies and techniques to help project managers do more with less. She also writes the award-winning blog A Girl's Guide to Project Management, and can be found on Twitter as @pm4girls.

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