

Titantic Type Project Problems

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I watched a fascinating show that shared a new theory about why the Titanic sank. I am not technical enough to get into all of the science, but suffice it to say it had something to do with the way light was refracted that evening. It answered the questions about why, when two very capable and professional watchmen were on duty, something as obvious as an iceberg could be missed until the last 30 seconds before the ship plowed into it; or, how a passing ship could totally ignore the flares that were being fired, and continue in the opposite direction.



The super light refraction theory has to do with the way hot and cold air were interacting with each other that evening, and the subsequent bending of light that created an optical illusion. It created a false horizon that obscured plainly visible objects such as an iceberg or flare.

It got me to thinking about a project I manage. Are any of them on the verge of sinking and am I oblivious to the danger ahead of me? Are there mirages or optical illusions that are enshrouding dangers lurking right beneath the surface? The following are some clues as to where these dangers often hide out and what we can do to shine a spotlight on them:

Inaccurate Status Updates

We rely upon others to provide us with the status of their work on a project. The typical status report cycle looks something like this: you know you have a weekly status meeting coming up the next day. Your project has work going on in about five departments currently, but you've been busy this week and haven't been able to touch base with everyone, so you feverishly make some phone calls.



“Oh yeah, everything is just fine,” says the department head. “Let's see, according to your project plan we should be around 60% complete. Yeah, I guess that feels right. Let's call it 60% complete.” That's good enough for you and you put it on that week's status report. The same cycle and conversation plays out week after week.

Then one week you call and ask for status and the alarm bells start clanging. The iceberg is dead ahead and there's nothing you can do to avoid the collision. The department head just notified you that in reality their part of the project plan is only 40% and they aren't going to make the date! What? How could this happen? The next group that needed this deliverable is queued up to start working on it in the next two days and now you find that it's going to be weeks late. Unconscionable!

You just came upon a danger that was right beneath your eyes and you failed to see the problem: inaccurate status updates. Everyone is busy and they may not truly know the status of their project. It's up to you to dig a little deeper. Stop by throughout the week and ask to see the progress with your own two eyes. It's not that you don't trust the department head; you are just doing your due diligence as a project manager to make sure everything remains on track.

Your Own Personal Biases

Here's an interesting phenomenon that can happen to us depending upon how we are wired as project managers. There are two extremes of project management; those project managers who are pessimistic and cynical by nature (the glass is half empty) and those who are optimistic and positive by nature (the glass is half full). Then, there is a host of project managers in between the two extremes.

Strangely enough, it's those who are more optimistic and upbeat in their view of the world that misses the warning signs. They have faith in themselves and their project teams to pull things off without a glitch. Sure, they may have a nagging suspicion that something just doesn't feel right about the project, but they choose to ignore it because it would reflect unfavorably upon them and their team. They continue full steam ahead and eventually run right into the iceberg that tears their project apart.

It's important to not let your personal biases cloud reality. Follow up on your sneaking suspicions if you don't feel something is right on your project. Where there's smoke there's fire and it's not good project management business to turn your head the other way because you don't think you are going to like what you will find.

Technological Icebergs

We often have a blind spot for technology; it sneaks up upon us before we can adjust our course. The nature of business today demands that new and innovative ways to implement things are adopted and embraced. Think about where we would be today if the technology never moved beyond green-screen software or CRT monitors. Innovative and disruptive technologies are always moving, and challenging project managers.

Why? Because they will not always work. There may be a new technology that is being adapted for a project you are managing. It's revolutionary and will make things much faster...if it works. The downside is that it has been untested and runs the risk of delaying the project. Many a project has been delayed and even sunk because of blindly believing that new technology or a new way of doing things will work without a glitch.

What can we do as a project manager? Always have Plan B in place to fall back upon. It's not that you don't want or believe the new technology will work, but you need to have a contingency plan in place in case it doesn't. Set a reasonable target date for all things to be done in using the new technology. If you pass that date, put things in motion that can keep the project moving forward toward an alternate path to completion. Always make sure you have performance tested whatever it is that you are releasing. Otherwise, you will be met squarely in the face with a non-scalable problem on your hands.

Performance Issues

A final danger that can lurk undetected beneath the surface until it's too late is performance issues. Your company may have constructed the best ship in the world. All the ship crews love it and it works flawlessly in all test environments. You've had hundreds of people kicking, poking, and prodding the ship if all ship HVAC system is gone or giving unexpected trouble.

You move forward with the ship launched with great excitement and optimism. However, complaints start coming in after just a few days. "This system is SO BAD," reports one ship crew. "It giving me a lots trouble," reports another ship engineer. "I'm going back to report the ship owner to get in another. This just doesn't well enough/suitable on this vessel," states a third.

What happened? Everyone loved it a few days earlier. You just hit an iceberg that you didn't see coming. The acceptance team of the ship that was testing it was on the system only a few at a time. Now that it's reported, dozens or even hundreds of people are using it concurrently. This is bringing the application to its knees, causing it to crash, and pushing people to abandon ship.

You need to be vigilant and diligent as a project management team to uncover these dangers to your projects. Always shine a spotlight on them and your project journeys will be safe and productive.