

Maria and the Asp

A Study in Risk Management

By

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There is an old fable about a peasant girl named Maria, who was asked to go collect fire wood along the mountain side in order for her family to be able to heat the farm house for the night. As she left to go out she was warned by her mother to be aware of the mountain asp that inhabits the hillside where the wood was to be collected. While Maria was collecting the firewood, she came across the asp. Being advised of the perils regarding the asp and heeding the warnings, Maria made sure she gave the asp enough room to avoid being bitten. As she passed by the asp and keeping a close eye on it, the asp turned to her and spoke out, "Please help me" it is very cold and if you do not keep me warm I will surely die." Maria hesitated and again heeding the warning of her mother said to the asp "If I pick you up you will surely bite me and I will die." "No, No", said the asp, "someone as kind as you does not deserve to be bitten by me and therefore I will not harm you." Maria looking down upon the asp, saw how beautiful it was and believing something that pretty could not harm her she bent down to pick up the asp and went on her way. As Maria proceeded to pick up her wood for the evening fire she felt a sharp pain on her side. As she fell to the ground she realizes she was bitten by the mountain asp. Once on the ground the asp slithers from Maria's pocket. With her last gasp of air Maria called out to the asp, "Why did you bite me after I have befriended you as I did?" The coiling asp turns around to Maria hissing and said, "You knew what I was when you picked me up, so why should my biting you be a surprise."

Old fables have a way of resurfacing with each generation and are used to demonstrate new life experiences and this one is no exception. But how does it apply to the project manager and the team? One of the most important tasks you will have on each project is the mitigation of risks. Some you will know by having made them in the past and from the wisdom of past mistakes know how to plan for them. Others will be new and a total surprise. Unfortunately like Maria and the mountain asp fable, some of you will minimize or trivialize some of the risks and those will be the ones that will bite you.

How does the project manager and the project team manage risks? First, by noticing that you the project manager, will not be able to identify all the risks by yourself and it is paramount that the project team play a pivotal role in the risk identification process. Second, there are some risks that appear to be minimal in size or least likely to occur, can be the very ones that stop you dead in your tracks. Third, by understanding like Maria, that accepting a situation knowing full well the dangers that exist could place you and your project in unnecessary perils without a back up plan.

Let's look at the project manager and the team. First and foremost the biggest risk you will face from the get go is if you, the project manager, have not ensured proper identification of all the key stakeholders from the client (internal or external) or from the project team side. Taking that a step further, ensuring you have the right individuals who can perform the required tasks comes in as a strong second. It once happened to a fellow project manager where he proceeded through the whole sizing phase, worked out all the requirements, deliverables, etc., had the customer sign off on the Statement of Work (SOW) only to find out the individual he negotiated with was an individual who did not have the authority to negotiate the SOW. It is paramount, as the project manager, you ask those qualifying questions that leave you with little doubt that you have the right players at the right time to begin the process.

Another crucial point for the project manager to understand is knowing when and how to let go of authority by delegating responsibilities. Creating an atmosphere where you do not micro manage to death those individuals who can be real contributors to the project helps you minimize your risk exposure. Remember, during this sizing phase this is the time to explore all aspects of the project and get "buy in" from the team. The most successful projects I managed were those where each key stakeholder felt they had a stake in the design or better yet had some "skin in the game." As a senior project and program manager, projects where I was called in to fix, the root causes focused in part on the inability of the junior project manager to let go of their authority and have confidence in the abilities of their team members to make decisions on their own. Many times it also had to do with the project manager's inability to manage contrary viewpoints.

How do you try to mitigate a small risk? First and foremost you and your team must decide what constitute a small risk versus a big one. Is it necessary to plan on a risk that requires the customer to open their door by 8:00 am sharp? Not necessary if it was only you and another consultant and you can enjoy the morning air for a few moments. Although one of the things I hate most is this attitude by many that an 8:00 am meeting can mean 8:10 am or 8:15 am. However, if you have 300 consultants waiting to perform an implementation project in 10 sites and they are waiting to get in, this risk that may be an annoyance for two team members could derail you big time if you are talking about 300 consultants, therefore a risk plan needs to be created.

It is also important at this point that you should never assume nothing can go wrong. I disagree with those of you who might say that this is thinking negatively. That is the whole point of the risk management process: determining all the possibilities, assign a weighted likelihood that it can go wrong, and have an action plan in your back pocket. Unfortunately, over the years one of the biggest risks I have seen kill projects and the team is the effect of politics in the work

place. In training the junior project managers, one of the things I try to tell them time and time again, is when you cannot determine why something is going belly up and you thought out all the possibilities, it is probably due to one of the biggest hidden risks that you will come across, politics.

Most of the time politics happens behind closed doors or between a very small group of individuals. You must be aware and develop a sixth sense. Using an old expression, if the hairs start sticking up on the back of your neck during conversations take heed because your brain is processing non verbal cues that is triggering an unconscious alert. I have guided project managers that I have mentored to pay close attention not only to the things that are being said in the room, but to also be very sensitive to those cues that are not openly expressed. Many times I use the expression “Do not listen to what they say; listen to what they do not say.” Watch the body language, there are very few people who have mastered complete control of their emotions.

I recall this happened to me while being given a migration project to manage. A European based company wanted to migrate their systems from Windows to Lotus Notes. I was brought in after the sizing phase and received word from my manager to take over the project a short time before the actual kick-off. I was told and I assumed all the key stakeholders were aware of and had bought into the project deliverables. The project was occurring at three separate sites and I was unable to be physically present, all my work was done remotely. A few days before the project kick-off I was calling the company site leads to introduce myself. As I was making my introductions, I discovered one of the sites did not know of the project, another site was using the servers assigned for the project and had installed them using their own configuration, and the last one disagreed with the whole project. Remember, I was called in at the last minute, not involved in the sizing, and made assumptions that the client’s team was fully aware, prepared, and agreed to the project. Each of these sites had major issues with the parent company overseas and decided that they would do their best to torpedo the project or at best ensure that they would make it difficult for headquarters. It took a lot of phone calls and late nights to resolve, but in the end it was one of my best projects which completed on time and on budget.

Like Maria how do you handle a risk you know exists but you take the chance that it will not affect you? Sometimes it is the gut feeling I mentioned before that we all have inside. But that gut feeling is based on bits and pieces of past experiences which determine the likelihood this risk will affect you. Do not underestimate the value of gut feelings. It has saved each and every one of us at one time or another. As we develop our technologies and become more dependant on them we also become desensitized to our innate senses, the very same senses which can keep us from danger.

I am a firm believer in gut feelings. Ok, I know what you thinking.... How can a highly trained project manager rely solely on their gut instincts? You would be absolutely right. That brings us up to the importance of the project teams in developing the project. In today's world there are two types of project teams: Internal and Outsourced. If you are an outsourcing type company where many times the account team writes and negotiates the Statement of Work with little or no input from the project side your risk exposure has multiplied by some factor of ten. It is so critical to let the pro's do what they do best...The account team finds the work the project team does it. The project manager and project team are always best suited to do the design of the project. The account teams have to let go of the fear that the project teams may say or do something which might upset the customer. In fact one of the best ways for both the account team and project team to develop better relationships with each other is to team up on new and existing accounts. Another key advantage is the project team begins to develop "Up Selling" skills thus increasing the account team without hiring additional resources. Over time both sides will learn what the other has to do in order to perform their jobs.

If you are an internal project team member it is critical that all the players assess and identify all the risks. As little as the risk may be, it is far better to call it out and determine the likelihood than to have never identified it before. Even the smallest of risks or the most far fetched ones should be discussed when developing the possibilities that can impact your project financials or target dates. I have found many times especially on software type projects developers, knew the business rules to an application better than the business stakeholders. Not to invite key developers to the sizing phase of the project and just rely on the business side for input would be suicidal for the project.

Here lies another critical component with project managers today that is not fully being developed. There are few managers who really know how to manage. Once you accept the role you must understand that you are the first to get hired and the first to be fired. Accept it, embrace it, and move on. The second you worry about a decision you make you are dead in the water. I recall a situation while working at IBM and having just been promoted to an exempt position I could not come to a decision about a problem. So after some time going one way and then another (waffling), I went to see my manager who recently promoted me into the position and asked him to help solve this issue. My manager who was a very big guy looked up at me and said "You wanted to be exempt, your past successes placed you in this position to be exempt, so get out of here and act like an exempt professional. I did not promote you to bring me problems to solve. I promoted you to identify a situation before it turns into a problem and bring me the solutions. I do not need an individual who can bring me problems, I need one who can solve them, stand up for them and implement them." He then told me to open the door and get out. To this day it was one of

my best career development lessons and I use this experience on those individuals that I have been assigned to mentor.

I have seen some of the best and brightest professionals get shot down or organizations and projects get stuck in the mud because of the current business environment. Highly skilled professionals will not make decisions or are being hampered to make a decision for fear of losing their jobs, being rated poorly on appraisals or not measuring up to their peers. It can happen to any one of us and trust me there are always other opportunities for you to explore and challenges that are there for you to excel. You must have the confidence in yourself and in the ability of your team that surrounds you.

Like many great leaders who have learned this lesson, it is not what you know, it is who you know, and as a project manager if you are able to ask the right questions, surround yourself with project members who are subject matter experts in their field and be willing to listen, accept, and welcome contrary views, then you will excel in this profession.

The role of the project manager is to have the vision of the project goals, listen and understand all the team members and customers needs and have the integrity to admit you do not know everything. In time, trust will develop with the customer which will allow you to have and maintain an open dialogue throughout the project. You will build on your successes, grow as an individual, and be identified as the "Go To" resource.