

## PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINT – AUGUST 2009

**A root cause of airplane crashes might be the culprit in many project failures*****By Ammar Mango***

Who would have thought that something as subtle as mitigated speech would be a major cause for airplane crashes? However it is clearly so, according to a study referenced in Gladwell's recently published book titled "Outliers." Mitigated speech is when a subordinate plays down his or her concerns when communicating with, in the case of airplanes, the captain. What does this have to do with project management? Much more than meets the eye.

When discussing lessons learned from a project failure, one often hears statements like this: "I knew this will be a problem from the beginning, but no one would listen to me." Those working in the project management field must have heard this story a thousand times over, about how someone "saw it coming" but the boss would not listen, when discussing a project issue.

In crashes as well as project failures, the problem is often avoidable and seems so simple. What makes it worse is that the problem is often caught by one of the crew members in time for someone to do something about it. Alas, in many of these failures, someone does not.

How could an already identified risk or problem with an already identified, and sometimes simple, response or resolution still hit the project? Project managers, are almost like pilots in today's business world. They get formal training and even certification before being allowed to manage projects. They are not incompetent to miss clear signs of danger, especially if warned clearly by a crew or team member.

While investigating airplane crashes, investigators listening to conversations recorded on the black box are amazed at what they often hear, and how easily pilots miss the warnings of their copilots and flight engineers regarding the imminent problem that will bring the plane down. In many crash cases, the copilot or the engineer bring up their concern in a very subtle way that the pilot just shrugs it off or even not notice it. This is called mitigated speech. Maybe the same is happening on failed projects.

Working as a project management consultant, one thing I often notice is how vocal and clear client employees are in pointing out a grave problem when they talk to me as a consultant, but they play it down tremendously in front of their managers. This is again a case of mitigated speech. I think a study should be done on how many of the

problems that cause project failure have already been seen beforehand and in time to fix them. It would be interesting to see how many of these were caused by mitigated speech.

When project managers get feedback from team members like this: “I already warned you that this might happen,” the amazing thing is that in many cases the project manager might not recall the team member bringing up the subject. “Of course if they did, I would do something about it,” is the reaction of most project managers. If this happens to you as a project manager, ask the team member to remind you of the occasion and what exactly he or she said to you regarding the issue. Usually the answer is amazing. It would be that he or she made a statement like “I hope it works,” and they assume that this is a clear enough sign for you, the project manager, that they feel “it” will not work.

Of course not all team members communicate like this. Some of them are very assertive and make their point across in a clear and complete manner. But with those who do not, we often lose the chance of getting their feedback and understanding and responding to their concerns, which in most cases are very valid.

One wrong conclusion to reach is that this is completely the fault of team members. Actually, this has to be a fifty-fifty proposition that both leader and team member need to work on. Team members need to learn to be more assertive to get their point across. Leaders on the other hand have an even more complex task and bigger responsibility in fixing the problem of mitigated speech on projects.

A project manager must set an open communication culture that tolerates differences of opinion and constructive feedback. The open communication culture goes a long way towards reducing the effect of mitigated speech. In a closed communication culture, it is easy for the most assertive of us to censor feedback in accordance to the cultural norms and the likings of the project manager.

On the personal level, a project manager should stress the importance of clear and open communication to all of his managers, team leaders, and team members. In cultures that are not used to openness or that have a rigid power structure that does not allow clear communication among ranks, the project manager should consider formal training for team members on the subject of open communication.

The project manager should set an example of being tolerant to criticism, even if it was harsh or wrongly articulated. Over reaction or making emotional statements in response to a poorly encoded statement by a team member might send the wrong signal to the whole team, and block communication and eventually lead to mitigated speech.

Another important technique to reduce mitigated speech is reprimands. These should be done in private, so that the manager can focus on the problem with that specific team member, and avoid negative effects of the conversation on the others, as well as avoiding the embarrassment of the team member being reprimanded.

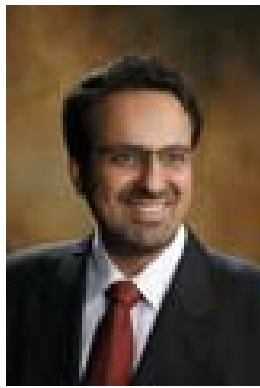
A project manager must learn to listen empathetically. This means not only listening to words spoken but also the tone and body language of the sender. These might be subtle signs, like the pattern of breathing of the sender, for example. Usually when there is a point of mitigated speech, often there is a brief pause in breathing before or after the mitigated speech. It is not only breathing but also eye contact, posture, face expressions and tone. Even the orientation of the speaker towards you as a listener can tell you how comfortable he is speaking to you.

It might be appropriate to end this article with a real life story of a “near miss” case of mitigated speech on a project managed by a good friend of mine.

*A team member walked by his office one day and poked his head in and asked “Abdul, do we have an HR policy on recruitment?” Abdul almost spontaneously answered “yes, please talk to the HR manager about it.” Abdul was busy and had a lot on his mind. However, he was lucky to pause and ask a question back to the team member. “Hmm interesting question,” Abdul said with a curious smile on his face, “ I am sure there is a reason you are asking this question,” he continued. The team member now came completely through the door instead of just poking his head in and said “well, without good recruitment policy, we might end up with unwanted people on our team.” Abdul now felt he was on to something. His face looked like he was not clear on what the team member was saying, as if asking the team member to help him understand: “and...?” he asked as if asking the team member to fill in the blank. Then, Abdul was shocked to hear what the team member said next: “You know, the new guy you just brought on board to work on the software account...He was fired for embezzlement from his previous job, even though his previous employer kept quiet about it as part of a settlement for him to leave. I could not believe he ended up here.” Abdul was lucky to catch the mitigated speech in time to do something about the issue. If he simply answered “yes” to the original question, then both Abdul and his team member would have continued going about their business on that day. However, there was a potential for a disaster and probably if it happened, the team member would come back to Mark or others with the “I knew this is going to happen” line.*

There is a lot more that can be said about how to avoid mitigated speech as a project manager and most of it has to do with communication, coaching team members, and setting an open communication culture. It might also help to simply bring up the subject with team leaders and team members and raise their awareness on the danger of this phenomenon and discuss with them their opinion on how to avoid it and avoid its negative consequences on projects.

## About the Author:



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