Why Projects Fail in the Hands of So-Called Experts: The Perils of Project Complacency

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We've all seen it. A project, brimming with potential and spearheaded by "experts," nosedives into the abyss of failure.

Why? The disconnect between theory and practice is often stark, and the culprit is frequently closer than we think: complacency.

It's the quiet killer of projects, whispering unobtrusive mutterings of "we've got this" while all the time undermining progress at every turn.

Project management methodologies, Gantt charts, risk registers, execution plans and blueprints – they're all considered essential tools in the PM's arsenal. Yet, they often become mere window dressing, ignored once the initial enthusiasm fades. And routine of delivery becomes the daily norm.

The "experts," confident in their past successes and perhaps blinded by their own reputations, fall into a dangerous lull. They stop actively monitoring, stop questioning assumptions, and, crucially, stop listening to the realities on the ground. The theory is sound, but the application is flawed, hampered by a creeping sense of "we "the experts" know best."

This complacency manifests in several ways.

Scope creep, that insidious expansion of project requirements, is often a symptom. "Just one more feature," the stakeholders plead, and the complacent expert, eager to please or unwilling to push back, acquiesces. Deadlines slip, budgets balloon, and the project begins its slow descent into chaos.

Communication breakdowns further exacerbate the problem. **Information silos** form, teams become disconnected, and crucial details fall through the cracks. The "expert," cocooned in their perceived mastery, fails to foster the collaborative environment essential for project success.

We don't have to look far for examples of projects derailed by similar issues. Consider the case of a large-scale IT implementation. On paper, the project plan is flawless. The team have meticulously mapped out every stage, accounted for potential risks, and secured buy-in from key stakeholders. Yet, months down the line, the project is behind schedule and over budget. Why? Complacency. The initial momentum masked underlying issues. User adoption was underestimated, integration with legacy systems proved more complex than anticipated, the timing of the change was not aligned with other key business priorities and the project team, lulled into a false sense of security, failed to adapt to or even acknowledge these rapidly evolving challenges.

Research from McKinsey highlights the importance of continuously and actively managing risks throughout the project lifecycle. Their numerous studies on the matter consistently show that projects with robust implemented risk management processes are significantly more likely to succeed.

However, even the most comprehensive risk register is useless if it's not actively monitored and updated. This requires a vigilant project team, willing to challenge assumptions and adapt to changing circumstances. Complacency, of course, makes this vigilance impossible.

Understanding when to call time on a project, and when to dig in deeper for 'one more push' to the finishing line, is another project enigmas that it is hard to quantify, yet alone codify. Once you have invested time, effort, resources and even emotional capital into a project, it may be hard to see the precise moment when returns are unlikely to equate to the project's costs. The business case simply no longer stacks up, and the sponsors support to move forward, and move mountains is but a distant echo of the past.

So, when is it time to pull the plug on a failing project? The answer is rarely clear-cut. It requires a candid and objective assessment of the project's current status, its future prospects, and the potential costs of continuing.

The Project Management Institute's new definition of project success is: "***Successful projects deliver value that justifies the effort and expense***." So according to this definition there is and should be a clearly defined line in the sand.

This assessment should be conducted by an independent body, free from the biases and vested interests that often cloud the judgment of those directly involved in the project. Here, the "sunk cost fallacy" can play a significant role. This cognitive bias leads us to continue investing in a project even when it's failing, simply because we've already invested so much time, money, and effort. We become reluctant to admit failure and cut our losses, even if it's the most rational course of action.

Harvard Business School research emphasizes the importance of "escalation of commitment," the tendency to double down on failing projects even when evidence suggests otherwise.

Scholars have looked at aspects such as psychological factors behind this behavior, including the sunk cost fallacy, where people and organizations continue investing in a project because of the resources already committed, rather than its future potential. Even experts can become too close to their projects, lose their reference and barings to reality and refuse to acknowledge warning signs.

Overcoming this bias requires strong leadership and a culture that values honesty and transparency. It also requires a willingness to challenge the sitting "experts" be they an individual or an institution, and their perceived infallibility.

Ultimately, project success hinges not just on expertise, but on vigilance, adaptability, and a relentless focus on execution. Complacency is the enemy of all three. It's a reminder that even the most experienced of "experts" can fall prey to cognitive biases and flawed decision-making. Hell sometimes even reinforced by the very systems put in place to guard against it.

So what can we do to influence against the complacency of a 'sure win'.

While there's no magic bullet to completely eliminate cognitive biases and flawed decision-making, here are some suggested steps that can significantly reduce their impact:

1. Awareness and Education:

Know your biases: The first step is recognizing that everyone, even experts, are susceptible to cognitive biases. Learn about common biases like confirmation bias, anchoring bias, and the sunk cost fallacy. Understanding how these biases work is crucial for identifying them in yourself and others.

2. Critical Thinking and Structured Decision-Making:

Challenge assumptions: Don't take anything for granted, including your own beliefs. Actively question your assumptions and seek out alternative perspectives.

Slow down to go faster: Hasty decisions are often driven by intuition and emotion, which can be heavily influenced by biases. Take your time, gather all the necessary information, and consider different options before making a decision.

Use structured frameworks: Employ decision-making frameworks even the simple methods like the "pros and cons" list, and more advance tools like decision trees, or scenario planning to ensure you're considering all relevant factors and making objective choices.

3. Collaboration and Diverse Perspectives:

Seek diverse input: Surround yourself with people who have different backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints. This can help you identify blind spots and challenge your own biases.

Encourage dissent: Create a culture where people feel comfortable expressing dissenting opinions. This can help you avoid groupthink and ensure that all perspectives are considered. Look out for the 'quiet

voice' in the room. And resist the temptation to always speak first as leader of your team.

Listen actively: Don't just wait for your turn to speak. Actively listen to others' perspectives and try to understand their reasoning, even if you don't agree with them.

4. Continuous Learning and Feedback:

Reflect on your decisions: After making a decision, take some time to reflect on the process. What factors influenced your choice? Were there any biases at play? What could you have done differently?

Seek feedback: Ask others for their feedback on your decisions. This can help you identify blind spots and areas where you can improve your decision-making skills.

Embrace lifelong learning: Decision-making is a skill that can be honed over time. Stay curious, keep learning, and stay open to new ideas and perspectives.

5. Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation:

Practice mindfulness: Mindfulness can help you become more aware of your thoughts and emotions, which can make you less susceptible to biases. Utilise 'stillness' in times of heightened emotions, and frenzied project activity. Be the one to keep your head, where others around you are loosing there's.

Manage your emotions: Emotions can significantly impact your decision-making. Learn to manage your emotions and avoid making important decisions when you're feeling stressed, angry, or overly excited.

And it is worth remembering that no one is immune to the perils of complacency. Even with these strategies, you'll still make biased decisions from time to time. The key is to be aware of your vulnerabilities and to continuously work on improving your decision-making skills.

Incorporating these steps into your daily life , you can significantly reduce the impact of cognitive bias and flawed decision-making, and moved towards a path of leading with enlightenment , guard against complacency, implement vigilance amd ensure application of better choices in the pursuit of more successful outcomes.