Experience is the teacher of fools: Project management lessons learned

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[Logos]
the problem

Experience is a dear teacher but fools will learn at no other. Benjamin Franklin
the problem

in a March 2007 web poll conducted by the Computing Technology Industry Association "nearly 28 percent of the more than 1,000 respondents singled out poor communications as the number one cause of project failure"
Roger Sessions estimates that the worldwide cost of IT failure is USD $500 billion per month.
the problem

the 2009 CHAOS Report (The Standish Group) reports that of all software projects surveyed, 44% are “challenged”, 24% failed, and only 32% succeeded.
in a recent survey of 1230 IT professionals conducted by Embarcadero Technologies, 2 of the 3 biggest project challenges cited by the IT pros are “poor planning” and “poor or no requirements”
the problem

• In a white paper written for Project Perfect by Taimour al Neimat, he lists

  poor planning
  unclear goals and objectives
  objectives changing during the project
  unrealistic time or resource estimates
  lack of executive support and user involvement
  failure to communicate and act as a team
  inappropriate skills

  as primary causes for the failure of complex IT projects
the problem

a recent tender from an (anonymous) government agency
• project to convert ~ 170,000 text images to xml
• value of project ~ USD $180,000
• 19 pages of definitions, governing law, evaluation criteria, contractual conditions, instructions about tender response format, etc
• technical requirements description? < 1 page
• data acceptance criteria? not mentioned
the problem

a recent program established by a prominent national library
• digitize more than 20 million text pages
• high level image and xml requirements
• value of work awarded?  > USD $5,000,000
• after award of work, METS xml technical requirements expand to 43+ pages from ~3 pages
• acceptance criteria?  added as an afterthought and not well defined
the problem

acceptance criteria for a digitization program at a prominent national library

character accuracy > 80%
word accuracy > 75%
significant word accuracy > 65%
the problem

communication

requirements

acceptance
The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion it has taken place.
George Bernard Shaw
the illusion

acceptance criteria for a digitization program

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word accuracy > 75%
significant word accuracy > 65%
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the illusion
why (better) communication is necessary
the illusion
what did you say?

“...in my opinion you will be very fortunate to get this person to work for you...”
the illusion
what do you see?

The young girl is turning away...

The old woman is very sad...
the illusion
perception

much of what you think happened or what you think you heard is based on misperception
the illusion perception

• mother and daughter
the illusion perception

- mother and daughter
- Innocence Project
  - eyewitness misidentification is the single greatest cause of wrongful convictions, playing a role in more than 75% of convictions overturned through DNA testing.
  - exonerated 258 wrongfully convicted men (as of Aug 2010)
the illusion
perception

- mother and daughter
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- Crab Nebula supernova
  - in 1054 a star in the region of what is now know as the Crab Nebula exploded. For several days it was the 3rd brightest object in the sky, bright enough to be seen in daytime.
  - the supernova was observed and recorded by Chinese, Japanese, and Arab astronomers and by native Americans. There are few and very obscure recorded European observations.
Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again. F. P. Jones
the fix
why (better) communication is necessary

“projects are about communication, communication, and communication”
the fix
why (better) communication is necessary

no communication ...
the fix
why (better) communication is necessary

no communication ...
little communication ...
the fix
why (better) communication is necessary

no communication ...
little communication ...
poor communication ...
the fix
why (better) communication is necessary

no communication ...
little communication ...
poor communication ...
reduced communication ...
the fix
why (better) communication is necessary

no communication ...
little communication ...
poor communication ...
reduced communication ...

... all result in more assumptions about intent!
the fix

simple principles for (good) communication

- be impeccable with your word
- don’t take anything personally
- don’t make assumptions
- always do your best
- be mindful
the fix
how do you communicate?

• communication is at most 30% verbal!

• remainder - 70% or more - is comprised of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, odors, ...

• telephone communication removes gestures, facial expressions, posture, odors, etc. only words and tone of voice remain

• written communication - email, letters, etc - removes all modes of communication save for words
for all future projects give especial attention to

proper planning
good communication
clear acceptance criteria
We all admire the wisdom of people who come to us for advice. Jack Herbert

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