



Reducing Post Project Blues

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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Introduction

Research conducted in 1989¹ found that *prospective hindsight* – imagining that an event has already occurred – increases the ability to identify reasons for future outcomes by 30%

Using that as a foundation, this course will be a guide to leading your team's pending project in assuming it **has failed in a spectacular fashion** – not just asking *what could fail*. This assertion of what has happened instead of what could happen will help the team visualize the hypothetical disaster more clearly to avoid it in reality.

No, this is not another walk down the heavily trafficked project preview road asking, *"What could go wrong with our project?"* It will be much more direct than that. Also, it's not an exercise in risk analysis that assumes we're going ahead 'as is' and asking, "what is the risk if we do?"

This course wants the project's manager and key members to meet before the project planning stage (if possible) and assume the project **FAILED TOTALLY and COMPLETELY**. Then, if the findings from that 1989 research are correct, use the best brains on the team to identify what led to its hypothetical demise. Once you know what led to it, steps can be taken to prevent that from happening.

Albert Einstein is credited with saying (paraphrased), *"Insanity is doing things the way you always have and expecting different results!"* This course helps you go upstream to identify what (hypothetically) went wrong to kill the project and change those things, so they do not lead to the same disastrous outcome.

There will be some discussion about organizational problems and traps that invariably arise and create havoc such as:

- The Abilene Paradox
- Group Think
- The dangers of True Believers (aka Project Champions)
- The lack of an Exit Champion
- The dangers of Cheerleading Squads

We will talk about spotting potential problems in work process issues that can arise early in a project before people become too vested in it and start staking out their 'turf'.

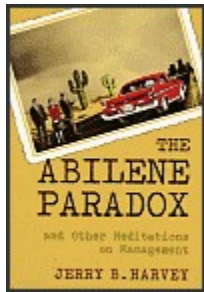
Then we will show you how to structure a *controlled* (not chaotic) brainstorming session with key project team members before project kick-off and give you several specific questions to ask that will stimulate thought in this pre-project activity identifying what led to the death of the project.

Once the team has identified the reasons for the project's hypothetical death, the PM can work to avoid the potential problems or develop contingency plans just in case the worst case becomes reality.

Typical Organizational Problems

Before we get into writing the project's obituary, it is important to understand situations that frequently arise in organizations where schedules, individual, departmental, and divisional goals usually conflict, and high expectations flourish: in other words, nearly everywhere!

The Abilene Paradox²



The Abilene Paradox is a situation in which a group of people collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of any of the individuals in the group. It involves a common breakdown of group communication in which each member mistakenly believes that their own preferences are counter to the group's and do not raise objections. It stems from assumed agreement instead of a perceived conflict.

It was observed by management expert Jerry B. Harvey in his book, *The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*.³ The name of the phenomenon comes from an anecdote in the book which Harvey uses to describe the paradox:

On a hot afternoon visiting in Coleman, Texas, the family is comfortably playing dominoes on a porch, until the father-in-law suggests that they take a trip to Abilene [53 miles north] for dinner. The wife says, "Sounds like a great idea." The husband, despite having reservations because the drive is long and hot, thinks that his preferences must be out-of-step with the group and says, "Sounds good to me. I just hope your mother wants to go." The mother-in-law then says, "Of course I want to go. I haven't been to Abilene in a long time."

The drive is hot, dusty, and long. When they arrive at the cafeteria, the food is as bad. They arrive back home four hours later, exhausted.

One of them dishonestly says, "It was a great trip, wasn't it." The mother-in-law says that, actually, she would rather have stayed home, but went along since the other three were so enthusiastic. The husband says, "I wasn't delighted to be doing what we were doing. I only went to satisfy the rest of you." The wife says, "I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in the heat like that." The father-in-law then says that he only suggested it because he thought the others might be bored.

The group sits back, perplexed that they together decided to take a trip which none of them wanted. They each would have preferred to sit comfortably, but did not admit to it when they still had time to enjoy the afternoon.

That situation – that some communication problems do not flow from conflict but agreement - is common in everyday life and so potent if allowed to flourish that a team must make special efforts to:

1. Make sure each team member at every level is aware of its existence. This can easily be done by renting the video and investing 26 minutes in showing it to your project team before the project begins.
2. Lead a discussion by soliciting examples from the team about past experiences when this – an unspoken assumption of mutual agreement that leads to undesirable outcomes - happened to them. A typical clue indicating this has happened is when someone starts their comments with, "Well, I could have told you...." (It makes you want to shake them while screaming, "Why didn't you say something??!!")
3. Adopt a code phrase that signals a warning that the team may be making this mistake of assumed agreement. We suggest just saying, "Let's not take a trip to Abilene – please speak up if there isn't agreement on this." But before that phrase has meaning for the team, they will have to see the video.

A word of caution here is to create an environment where team members feel it is safe to speak up. There must be a sense of security in knowing no one will discount their comments



or laugh at them because it may be the team's meekest member who spots a potential landmine that could kill the project.

If they don't feel comfortable speaking up in front of the group, then invite them to come to your office and talk, send an anonymous note via interoffice mail, slip a note under the door, or do anything that encourages them to share their concerns!

The Abilene Paradox is related to the concept of groupthink (next) in that both theories appear to explain the observed behavior of groups in social settings. The crux of the paradox is that groups have just as many problems managing their agendas as they do in managing their work.

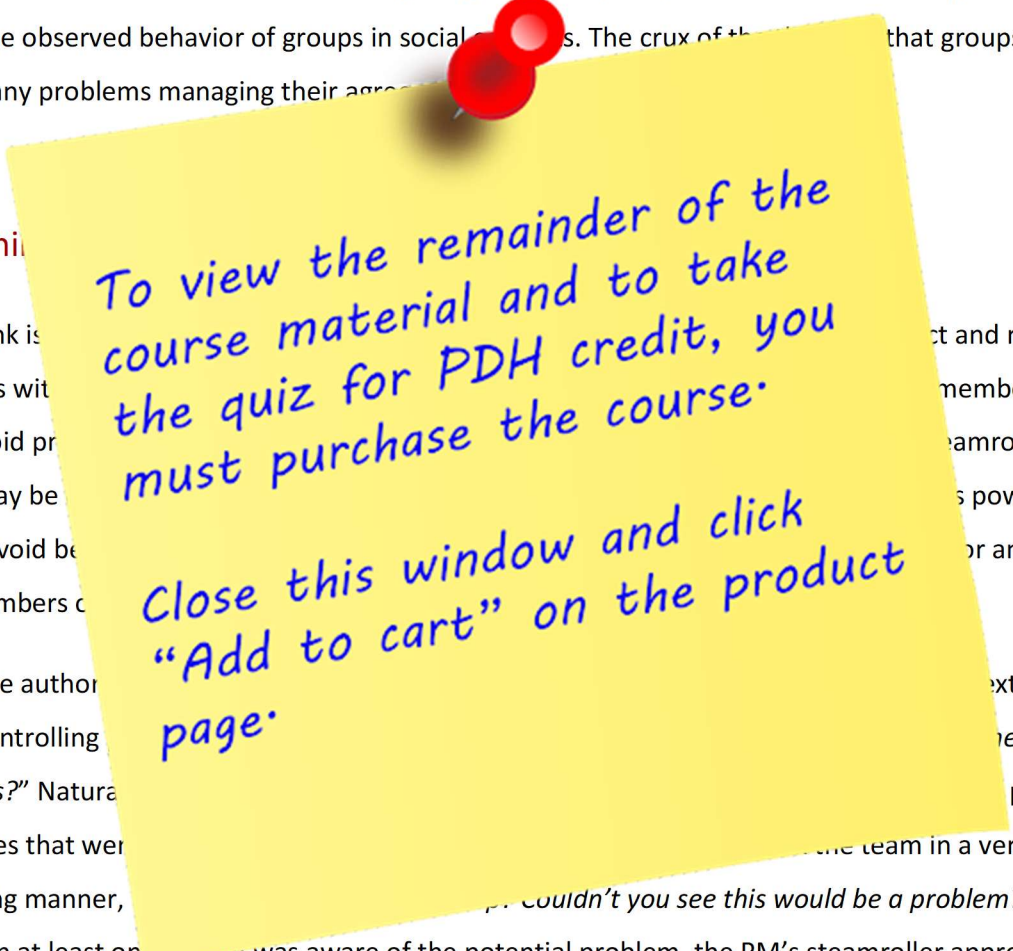
Groupthink

Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when group members conform to a consensus without critical thinking. Group members avoid problems and "groupthink effect" may be a result of a desire to avoid being the only one to voice concerns or angering other members of the group.

The course author, Richard Grimes, has written a textbook on groupthink. Type A controlling behavior is a common cause of groupthink. "objections?" Natural groupthink problems arise from issues that were not discussed in a very demanding manner, such as "Why couldn't you see this would be a problem?" While I am certain at least one person was aware of the potential problem, the PM's steamroller approach made it nearly impossible for anyone to speak up.

Groupthink may cause groups to make hasty, irrational decisions, where individual doubts are set aside, for fear of upsetting the group's balance or authorities.⁴

According to Irving Janis⁵, decision making groups are not necessarily doomed to groupthink and identified several ways to prevent it:



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