A-320 to glider: A parable on *Perspective*

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You've just finished watching that brilliant TED Talk. No, not the one with the man in the orange shirt, the one where the chap talks about "3 things I learned while my plane crashed" It's powerful and moving. You recall hearing the pilot interviewed about it and marveling about how he realised that at his rate of descent he wouldn't reach the alternative airport the control tower proposed. Every aircraft has its own glide-path and perhaps in a fibreglass glider he might have made the distance but not in an Airbus A-320. So he steered his aircraft which was now no longer one of the fastest and powerful transport planes but merely an aluminium glider into the Hudson River

But what would happen if a project had no pilot (project or change leader absent or completely ineffectual) and no power (ideas, and resources supplied at the right time)? Would it land safely? What would happen on the way down?

You'd love to sit back and put your feet on the desk and have a good, long, deep think, but this is the world of always-on mobile devices and global competition and being seen to be 'relaxing' or 'thinking' could mean you're re-applying for your own job in a weeks time. So you hunch over your desk in a 'work' posture hiding the fact that you're trying to open your mind and think... and then the phone goes. The news is not good. One of your key project managers has had to quit for personal reasons. Their absence is effective immediately. You swear inwardly and then slowly it dawn son you. Slowly you realise that you now have pilot less project.

You allow yourself to look into the future to see what's going to go right or wrong next.

You quickly realise that what will happen next depends on the type of project. If the goals and approach and methods are fixed clear and obvious to all the team members and stakeholders then the project will only stutter when a new decision point comes along or if any of the people stops delivering their accountabilities to the plan. However if the goals were uncertain or evolving, or if the method and approach were also in flux or evolving the future path would be very different. The more open the project is the wider the range of possible influences on its future.

You shift uncomfortably in your chair, you've be more relaxed if you felt that the stakeholders and team had the fixed clarity and were effectively painting-by-numbers, but even so how would they know that someone hadn't delivered to plan? In some projects progress is obvious and measurable, like when you're getting a new kitchen fitted at home, these 'visible' projects are much easier to track than say a culture change project. But having said that visibility usually attracts interference, In the same way as you hassle your builder at home the stakeholders try to meddle a bit too much. So the level of visibility will also influence the future of the pilot-less project

As your mind hums you think 'politics' Some projects have a lot of organisational politics and in the absence of the guiding hand of the pilot the project will get 'taken-over' by partisan interests. You know that projects, where the people driving the change are in the same organisation as those delivering the change, and where no real money is changing hands, are the ones which are most complex politically especially if the project is intended to change the power balance in the organisation (as significant projects often do). Your damp palms rub your temple as your head sinks into your hands. Wait, in this project, the people driving the organisation are in another organisation to yours! You have to deliver and there is a contract in place and real money will change hands. Phew! You won't get embroiled in politics. And then it dawns on you … but you will get involved in lots of contractual arguments and negotiations on quality, timing costs, service levels and… You conclude, the Driver versus Deliverer balance that the relationships, relevant positions and power of is who is driving the change and who has to deliver it will be very influential on the future of the project

In a world where every project succeeds we need to redefine projects to not only include the effort but also to include the benefits we are after. We need to extend our projects even earlier to the wisdom in the spark of the ideas which give rise to the initiative behind them and widen them to consider the wider collateral damage they can cause

If learning more about this is of interest to you join us for Conference: ZERO on the 17th of October and look out for the sessions on Perspectives

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