

Hero to Zero: A parable on Performance

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So it's been a really smooth month you know you've done a great job. You started green and you've ended green. No instances of being hauled in front of the critical project steering group. The end user stakeholders barely noticed that any change had occurred because you involved and engaged them months ago so the change is really 'no big deal'. You're feeling triumphant.

As you walk down the corridor you see the COO coming in the opposite direction you're not expecting thanks – that would be too much in the company culture but at least you should get a nod and a smile. At ten feet separation you look for eye contact and begin to smile at two feet you get worried and then it happens

You've been completely blanked. You slow your step and glance backwards over your shoulder, your steps falter and then slowly you pick yourself up and stroll away.

At home you're moody. Your other half asks and having replied "It's nothing." half a dozen times, you finally open up and the emotions spill out. You don't get it. You've done everything right, caused no worries to anyone, No surprises anywhere. Full and gentle buy in. Your faultless text book list of project excellence is almost endless. The ultimate zero defect perfect project!. After a half hour rant you pause.

Your other half looks at you with a puzzled expression, almost accusing. Softly and gently they say "Well, you probably made it look too easy so no one recognises how hard it was and what a great job you've done."

You feel like you've been slapped. Your brain reels. It can't be... No they can't be that stupid. And then slowly it dawns on you. No crises = No senior stakeholder mindshare. No mindshare= not important enough for me (senior and important as I am) to look at.

We'll you're starting your next project on Thursday. You have a plan.

This time you'll succeed. But this time you'll be a hero. When any thing goes wrong you'll make sure every one knows and then you'll move more than heaven and earth, again making sure everyone knows, to put it right. You're not unethical you won't start the fires yourself but you'll let them get big enough to notice but not dangerous and then fetch the fire extinguisher.

But you're not a gangster, you would love to do the right things and not manipulate people or the situation for your own ends. If only there was a way to demonstrate to everyone that the work you had done had prevented issues well in advance. You don't want another metric or someone else to try to measure and control you – what you need is a 'grown-up' self assessment where you could monitor your own effectiveness, patting yourself on the back when you avoided things going wrong and slapping your own wrist when they didn't.

And if someone did ask you could still be a hero even though zero had gone wrong. You needed to have one of those envelopes magicians always sellotape to the bottom of the chair at the start of the trick. You know the ones which they open at the end and say, "if you remember before I asked you to choose a random bank note I wrote the number I predicted and sealed it in this envelope and now I can reveal..."

In a world where every project succeeds we need to our attitudes to who the project heroes are. Rethink the cultures we have and which behaviours they encourage. Educate our key leaders and senior stakeholders to be able to better realise the difference between quiet calm competence and frenetically delivering at the margins.

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 Performance Indicators

