**Late and Over Budget**

**The Root of the problem**

*“Life is Wiggly” – Alan Watts*

*“Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.” – George E. P. Box*

Here’s a little exercise to get us started. I got this idea from a book called “Sleight of Mouth” by Robert Dilts. Think of something that you could have done yesterday and didn’t do, go easy on yourself, don’t think of something your rarely do, or you’re not likely to do, think of something everyday, that you could have done. Now think of something that you did actually do. OK, this is the really important bit. Look at these two things in your mind, the thing you could have done and the thing that you actually did and try to notice differences between them. How are you absolutely certain that did the thing that you really did? What is there lacking, or different about the thing that you didn’t do that makes you certain that you didn’t do it?

When I do this exercise as part of training courses I get all sorts of interesting answers, people tend to miss the mark of telling me exactly how they know that one thing in their mind was real and another is not real and rather move straight over to explaining why a series of things that “should” have been done didn’t get done. For example, I could have gone to the gym, but instead I stayed at home and watched TV because I actually like watching TV and I don’t like going to the gym, even though I know I should. This in itself is an instructive exercise to do on any project – look at the things that didn’t get done and ask “why” (a way into the Lean concept of the five whys) but it it’s slightly off the point that I’m trying to make.

When I tried this exercise I didn’t go back to something that happened the previous day, I went back to something that had happened in the previous hour – lunch. I sat at my desk and thought about the lunch that I’d had – chicken soup, and then I thought a bit about the lunch that I could have had – a bacon sandwich. Then I thought about what was the difference between the two. How was I certain that I had had the chicken soup for lunch and equally certain that I had not had the bacon sandwich. And the thought that came to me in answer to this was genuinely an inspirational, eureka moment. I know that I’d had the chicken soup for lunch because I could remember spilling it on my shirt!

At this point your heart maybe sinking, with the slight suspicion that I am a lunatic, but trust me there actually is an important point about project management, especially management of software development projects. To generalise, how did I know the difference between a “plan” that hadn’t been executed: have a bacon sandwich for lunch; and a “plan” that had been executed: have chicken soup for lunch. I was certain that the chicken soup plan had been executed, because there had been problems with it – the stain on my shirt. Unexpected trouble that will result in extra work to make things all right is a very, very good indication that an attempt has been made to execute a plan.

This difference between the clean elegance of plans that have not been executed and the dirty troublesome-ness of plans that have been executed is the single thing that makes project management so stressful and difficult. Almost every job advert that I have seen for a project management position, almost every group exercise that I’ve ever done that tries to get from people what they expect from a project is running well will contain the phrase “On-time and to budget”. And if you ask those people what they take “on-time and to-budget” to mean, they will invariable answer “delivering according to a plan.” These same people, when you ask them what constitutes a “bad project” will talk about projects that a “late and over budget” and that “don’t go according to plan”.

This is really weird. If we stick with my examples of the chicken soup and the bacon sandwich, which lunch are they praising? The bacon sandwich, the one that didn’t happen. But this is the big question – which lunch *actually fed me?* Well, that would be the lunch that didn’t go according to plan, the one where the costs ran over, embarrassed us professionally (I can’t even drink soup without spilling it on myself) and took far too long (once you take the shirt clean-up into account). Yes, that’s right, the messy troublesome option was the one that actually nourished me.

How on earth could this happen? How could we get ourselves into a situation where there is almost universal agreement that delivering on-time and to-budget, to a plan is a good thing and almost no mention of delivering actually value, even if it be in a messy fashion?

The first problem is that we never really see the real world or experience it with our other senses, we simply see and sense models of it. The real world, as the religious thinker and philosopher pointed out, is “wiggly”. But our plans and our models almost never are. Our plans feature clear discrete steps, straight lines, and if we are being really sophisticated, possibly a curve or two. Because we don’t see the real world, but rather these beautifully sleek models and plans, the things that we become emotionally attached are – guess what? The models and the plans. Even though it is only the messiness of the real world that can feed us.

The second problem is that when we get together in organisations, we take our love of models and plans and fear of the messiness of reality with us. There we work to “reify”, I’m almost tempted to type “deify”, these plans. We start treating them as if they are the real world.

*Notes for next time:*

*Planning doesn’t change the world*

*The best that a good plan can do is act as marshalling point for resources to discover value.*

*What to do:*

*Focus on delivering actual value.*

*Understand how to be useless, unprofessional, evil, bad, wrong and valuable.*

*What to do if the only value is delivering on the plan.*

*Tunnelling towards value. Run away.*