The Apocalyptic Threat of Undead Projects, Part 2

This is part two of a two-part piece. Part one can be found here *[1].*

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On the sacrificial project, direction and decisions will change as the leaders change. On the recipient project, leader personalities are most likely to inquire about and challenge the decisions and directions already in place. The result is change and waste in both projects as the newly adjusted teams reformulate before settling into a new rhythm.

When we make changes and trigger the reset process we sometimes react to the slowdown by adding even more resources in a mistaken belief that more people and resources will speed up the development. That belief holds true until you reach the correct number of resources. When we exceed that number, we slow things down again as we try desperately to communicate and keep resources busy instead of focus on what really needs to be done.

So, when we put too many resources on a project that is behind schedule, not only do we slow down our behind-schedule projects, we are not using those resources where they could be more effective. If we stole them from other projects that could be progressing, but are now crippled, we just created more zombie projects.

Finally, the least considered, but most damaging impact of the living-dead projects is morale. No one wants to be assigned to the doomed project. We like to succeed. We hate to fail. We hate being set on a course of failure that we cannot control. So, our people who realize they are on such a course take action to change course.

When we can't get the project we are on properly prioritized or resourced or otherwise enabled, we decide to save ourselves. We beg, plead, argue, or, in some cases, manipulate until we get assigned to something else. Therefore, our own personnel become part of the phenomenon of changing resources and plans that propagates the undead curse.

Sometimes, when we can't find a better future inside the organization, we look for better prospects outside the organization. Unfortunately, it is our best and brightest people who are most likely to find opportunities elsewhere. How much is an experienced and creative person worth to future products and business? How much is lost in the way of development productivity and replacement process by the unexpected loss of valuable personnel?

In short, the zombie projects, those that are not set up to truly succeed and are also not put to a merciful death, negatively affect everyone in the organization in some way. Even the leadership wastes time. Every manager has sat in a meeting unproductively asking and answering questions concerning the zombies.

What is that project worth? Why is it behind schedule? Why is it in testing when this other project could be in testing? Who is leading it? Do we need a more competent team to get it back on track? Can we take resources from it for other projects? Who allowed that to happen? Isn't that the same report we had last month? Why isn't it moving forward? What is the problem?

The questions go on forever without meaningful resolution and, once cursed, there are only two solutions that will save the project and the business from further torment. We can properly resource and prioritize the project, set it up for success and leave it alone so it can finish, or we can kill it.

Chances are the reason it is lingering in a state of half-life is because it just isn't important enough to share the queue with the other projects and opportunities. That means that a merciful death is the right thing to do. When you decide on euthanasia, be compassionate.

It is very, very important to remember that as much as we have talked and decided for the business in terms of efficient use of "resources," those resources we are discussing are people! Those people have bled and struggled to succeed in spite of our leadership failure. Some of them still believe in the project and the solution they strived to develop.

When we callously announce that the project our people have devoted themselves to is officially dead, we not only kill the project, but we kill morale. We may as well say to our people, "We don't care, go ahead and find someplace else to work." We spend so much time grooming our people to fit in the culture, to understand the processes, to work well as teams. To be callous, we don't want to waste that effort. In true leadership terms, we value our teams more than that.

When we announce the decision to execute the zombie we must be compassionate.

Accept blame for not setting the project on a course of success; do not let the failure fall on the project team that devoted itself to success in spite of us. Acknowledge the innovation, creativity, effort, and devotion of the team members. Thank them for it and ask their forgiveness as they re-devote their efforts to different projects.

It may be that we don't see clearly the harm that the on-going, never successfully finishing, marginally important projects, cursed to a neither living, nor dead, fate have on our business, our teams, and our overall performance. Maybe we just don't have the courage to tell the teams and believers that they are working on a doomed project. Many times we fall into the trap of convincing ourselves that we must finish what we started just to get something, anything for our efforts.

Whatever the reasons, we harm our organization in numerous ways by letting the undead, zombie projects to consume our energy and resources. We also risk the curse of "undeath" to spread to other projects or business units. The damage easily grows.

We must learn to recognize the zombie projects and either lift the curse that afflicts them, or put them to a merciful death. Take some time this week and look at your project portfolio. If you see a zombie on the list, work with your leaders to do the right thing. Your leaders and your personnel will thank you in the end, and your business will be healthier.

Stay wise, friends.

What's your take? Please feel free to comment below!

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