Project Disasters and how to survive them, by David Nickson and Suzy Siddons

A Book Review by Ian Jay

‘Disasters Happen’, this is the premise upon which this book is based. The goal of the authors is to assist project managers who may find they are dealing with situations that are in some way a disaster for their project. The authors observe that organisations with a blame culture are more likely to need such advice and are less able to take advantage of it.

The text defines disasters as events whose impact is to prevent the project achieving its objectives. They arise due to one of six main causes, though a few less common causes are also mentioned. The authors, one of whom has an IT project background, sets out two additional causes that they noticed are common to IT projects. These are poor requirements and the sheer complexity of many IT projects. The main advice in the book is applicable to all projects and it draws examples from construction and aerospace as well as IT.

The book has several checklists including one entitled ‘Auguries of impeding doom’. This provides a list of clues that things are going wrong. Early warning is also the theme of a chapter on Risk. This is supported by a useful table that maps the six main causes of disaster with a set of primary causes of the problem. Of the primary causes change is common in all and the authors advise the Project Team to ask each day ‘what has changed?’

The authors suggest one of three strategies when disaster strikes, abandon the project, start again, or salvage the situation. The process begins with root cause analysis. There is a whole chapter devoted to an approach to sorting out a disaster situation. Well illustrated with case examples such as Apollo 13 and the Comet airliner. A key point made in the book is that an organisation that gets to the end of a disaster needs to conduct a thorough debriefing to obtain the lessons learned. The aim is to avoid a similar situation arising in future, or being better prepared should it do so. They emphasize that it is not about finding someone to blame.

There is a chapter dealing with the impact organisations and projects have on one another. Emphasis is placed on a culture of openness. Information sharing and active client involvement are common in such a culture. The open culture is less likely to experience a disaster and more likely to recover when one does strike. Support; in the form of funds, flexible procedures, and knowledge, are also ways the organisation can help to cope with disaster.

Two primary sources of support are suggested in the book, the company HR department and the public relations function. The HR department can assist in finding special skills needed in the crisis. This is perhaps their most important role in assisting the project manager. Public relations are important, particularly where public money is involved. The media have an interest in what is happening, particularly when things are going wrong.

The public relations aspect of projects that are in trouble is discussed in some detail. Cases are drawn from public IT and construction projects to show how critical managing this aspect of a disaster is. There are tables and checklists to assist in dealing with the media and press. These include ideas about what the media might be looking for in the situation. The key advice is to engage a professional to deal with these external parties and to have a thorough communication plan in place.

The last chapters of the book deal with what to do and what not to do. The three survival strategies are dealt with, setting out the benefits of each. A step by step method is outlined for those who find themselves confronted by a disaster. A final chapter gives advice on what not to do. Alternatives to doing nothing such as; trying to pass blame, pouring in resources, ending the contract, and removal of
the project leader are all discussed. Why each of these strategies is dangerous is given on a case by case basis.

The appendix has two short sections where Teams and Stress are each dealt with. These support various parts of the main text where leadership, communication, and negotiation are dealt with. All these are important skills managers need to deal with a crisis.

This book would be of value to any manager with an interest in project risk. Where many books cover planning to avoid risk, this one deals with risks after they have materialised. The chapter dealing with public relations would be of great use to those in the public sector, or project managers who may be faced with the media at some time in their career.

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