

MURPHY on the ART of MANAGEMENT

...the game of the quick and the dead...

Allow me to introduce you to three words: Mediocrity and Unrealistic Expectations

Hello! I'm David Screen... Technical Author (*Design Engineer*).

I would like you to consider carefully my opening statement that...

“...Problems are mainly incurred at the design stage of most projects and assignments: that is to say, they're in-built. And it rarely matters whether the venture was meticulously prepared before implementation or assembled ad-hoc over a period of time. The end result is usually the same the world over: a glaring shortfall on the bottom line of the profit & loss sheet”.

This is invariably the case whether you know you have a problem or not... or are being kept in the dark.

If you have an ongoing problem with a product, process, system or production line then you may be interested in a distillation of forty years experience of being in the thick of such difficulties. This experience has been gained through my involvement with well over sixty companies during those forty years. Ranging from very large household names down to the very smallest and most insignificant of back street, owner managed enterprises. I remember less than a quarter fondly and the majority with mind numbing incredulity. The most telling memory is that the smaller the company the less room for hiding errors, omissions and incompetence. Larger companies will always have an edge here as backwaters, blind alleys and scapegoats abound. Internal politics and gross incompetence do more long-term damage to companies than a Second World War air raid. If only the shareholders knew.

People are the culprit: but not always bad people. Bad people can be seen for what they are and, hopefully, something will be done about them before it's too late. And not good people either: oh yes, there are lots of good people out there... **somewhere**. No, the real company killers are unseen for what they actually are: insidiously lurking waiting to suck the very life's blood out of the business. Most of them are very nice people, but deadly non-the less for their normal disposition. They occupy all professions and all walks of life: they are the **mediocrity**. Inoffensive individuals who, by one means or another, have attained positions of *technical authority* beyond their capacities, capabilities and comprehension.

I haven't seen the company yet, where this effect is not present. In some businesses or professions it's marginal and loosely controlled to a greater or lesser degree: in others it's traumatically rampant and systemically unstoppable.

I've made a living from this beast of **mediocrity**. I used to try to highlight its effect - to show its presence - but that was most unwelcome by all concerned. Eventually I accepted it like an old friend: it kept me busy. And absolute and total discretion is now the order of the day.

In my earlier years I functioned as a Design and Development Engineer... that's what I did. I designed and developed things for companies: self-propelled robotic manipulators for the Channel Tunnel being but one of my claims to fame. However, a lot of the time I was really nothing more than a **Mr. Fix-it**. Sorting out other people's problems, fixing shortcomings and generally shutting the stable door after the very expensive horse has bolted. **Don't misunderstand me:** I don't consider myself the best of the best. I'm simply very good at what I do and I saw things, as an outsider that eluded those who were, for obvious reasons, more emotionally involved. I saw into the hearts and minds and behaviour of companies who regularly confused the battle with the battleground. They needed a game changer.

Unfortunately some companies – like some governments - will procrastinate and haemorrhage for years before deciding to stem the flow of lost and squandered revenue. And this is where I often came in. But before I accepted an assignment, either to design from new or to rectify an existing work, I urged companies to consider the central components of the following: -

When attempting to rectify problems and/or productivity deliverables (often against cap-ex theoreticals) it's necessary to determine whether or not the costs of perceived rectification can be recovered by the expected productive capacity increase. This is where risk management is important: i.e. do we risk spending any more money in the hope of making good our perceived losses.

Risk management maths will light the way here – but remember – bullshit **can and does** baffle brains.

The three main reasons for product, process, system or production line failures are:

- **Unrealistic management expectations**
- **Insufficient primary performance**
- **Labour limitations**

Labour limitations can usually be overcome quite simply, if not uneventfully. And this may well have a lot to do with inappropriately selected personnel: not their fault... **management's fault**.

Insufficient primary performance can also be overcome in a somewhat like manner, if not as inexpensively. Shouting a bit louder though might not do the trick. And we should all beware of **mind guards**: people who only tell you what they want you to know. Not **what you really should know**. And – when the shit hits the fan - it rarely pays to rely on an explanation passed back up the line from the sharp end: it's invariably a protective device and often, in varying degrees, at odds with reality.

However, **unrealistic management expectations** are areas where most of the pain will be experienced. Especially where variances and discrepancies are large or the productivity envelope is expensive in overall company terms: as indicated by departmental bottom lines. Here we are, unfortunately, dealing with presumed experiential knowledge and judgmental competencies. And at such a juncture reliance is invariably placed squarely upon the inherited problem syndrome: rightfully or wrongfully so. And phrases like; **"...it's nothing to do with me, it's always been like that..."**, fail to quell the destructive potential within us all when we choose not to materialise a problem by solidifying it with a name.

This is where I return to my opening statement: **"product, process, system or production problems are mainly incurred at the design stage of most projects: that is to say, they're in-built"**.

As a mechanical engineer I like to think I (arguably) looked for a balance between the best and the reasonable. And if we accept what has been said by the late and great, that... **"the best is the enemy of the good"**; we are reminded that excellence invariably has a high front end loading, via appropriate resourcing. Whereas the **mediocre** eventually creeps up on us with a high back end loading through hindsight via perceived loss because of realised shortcomings and failures. A failure to perform in either the past, present or future being the most insidious of **mediocre's** incompetence's

Clearly, one may surmise, the only safe ground is in the middle. Except where unrealistic expectations are concerned: here there is no middle ground. Only a fool's errand.

From an observational or investigatory point of view discovering variances and deviations of expectancy, or even just plain old problems, within a complex production process or system usually requires the investigator to move from the macroscopic to the microscopic. That is, firstly understand what is happening globally, secondly, understand what is happening elementally and thirdly, overlay the insights against what is expected to happen definitively.

However, from an internal managerial point of view it is necessary to achieve a responsible outcome that satisfies the suitability, timeliness and cost constraints of the company.

Rarely does one necessity match the other: something always has to be sacrificed. Corners may have to be regrettably cut. This shortfall is seldom conducive to attaining a satisfactory result. This is invariably why intensions, systems and processes fail in the first place. Either because not enough - or the right sorts - of resources were employed from the outset or because what was implemented simply was incapable of fulfilling perceived expectations. Welcome to the universal **mediocre**.

Incurring problems is easy; it requires only loose thinking and abhorrent behaviour. Rectification, on the other hand, often requires a different mental set and functionality much removed from the norm. And **mediocre** mentalities greatly disadvantage themselves and their objective. Rectification requires involvement and intent that is uncluttered by the dubious concerns of self worth and position.

Rectification also requires an unshakeable faith in the need to identify how all-systemic elements achieve functional cohesion and relevant justification. **It requires the ability to selectively highlight elemental usefulness in practice.** It requires perception and intuitive judgement and an unwillingness to accept the distorted vision of others and their departure from objectivity.

The systemic investigation of product, process, system or production line problems requires that the observer maintain impartiality and an ability to distinguish between problem solving needs and situational management objectives. **Sometimes the chasm is mind-boggling.**

Here we must step boldly into the lion's den because the real hobgoblin with productivity systems of any kind is that often (**for often read nearly always**) the roles and behavioural aspects of the people in the system are actually (or have become) part and parcel of the problem itself. Sometimes simply overcoming presidential thought processes and the preferential maintenance of inappropriate ideas and methodologies can have profound effects to the good.

What can be extracted - **by the investigator** - from product, process, system or production line problems, as solvable eventualities, depends upon how each participant sees their role in the scheme of things. And success is interdependent with what we perceive as relevant facts and how we conceive appropriate solutions. And, of course, **how much the client is prepared to be supportively involved in the process.** Sacking the brother in law because his judgement and behaviour is killing the company can often be a real smart, if somewhat unwelcome, move.

Having to pretend that twice as much work can be achieved in half the necessary time - because that's all management has budgeted for - is a normal activity in most companies that disgraces itself in a particular way: absolutely guaranteeing a predictable, if unprepared for, outcome.

On too many occasions have I been told, **"don't bother looking at that we don't have time, anyway it's been checked and okayed already"**. Only to find abhor rations inconceivable to the original perpetrators and their ilk.

Checked out by whom, when, where, how, why: what was their motivation? Were they being objective or were they working to a deadline or even - heaven forbid - a time and budgetary constrained hidden agenda? I keep six honest serving men – **they taught me all I knew**. Check it out... Rudyard Kipling.

When asked by harangued and pilloried production managers, **"can you find the problem and fix it?"**. I, in all honesty, have to reply, **"do you really want me to find the problem, and if I do... do you truly want me to fix it?"**. Believe me, this is not as stupid as it sounds: after all, if I - an outsider - prove to be successful, where the people living with the problem have been unsuccessful: draw your own conclusions here. **Killing the messenger is a well-played game.**

On the odd and rare occasion that I was unsuccessful (yes: it happens – I'm not God for Christ's sake!) the visible release of tension in the people around me was all too clear. They know the problem was unresolvable: after all, if it was fixable then they would have fixed it long ago... **surely!**

It is a resounding and undeniable fact of life that everyone, without exception, wants the quick fix, the shortcut and the fast return. And because of this they're drawn to those who appear to be offering to relieve them of their worries and responsibilities in the simplest and most economical fashion.

But... **...wasn't that how the problem manifest itself in the first place?**

The universal prayer is, **"oh shit! - don't let this happen: not now"**. Is there ever a good time? It's all down to cause and effect. Without the cause the effect surely cannot manifest itself. And using the same type of mentality to remedy its own offspring isn't a judicious use of anyone's resources.

It's often said that a good engineer can do for one pound what everyone else can do for two pounds. This is only a half-truth: and a deceiving one at that. It should go something like this... **"good engineers cost more in the short term because they design out long term problems"**. And they do this via the modality of experience: something that young graduate engineers are twenty years away from possessing. This mental functionality cannot be taught, it has to be earned by **rite of passage** and those obligatory... **crisis rites**. This takes time: and the more time spent at the **event horizon** – that's the conception and design stage - the less time spent on call-back, rectification and fence mending.

Unfortunately, as in most things, really (and I do mean really) good engineers are thin on the ground. And the disheartening norm now is a **mediocre**, apathetic, half-hearted attempt to do for one pound that, which really should have been done for two pound in the first place. But it doesn't stop there because then there's the consequential loss of orders of magnitude of pounds worth of productivity and (if it doesn't keep being swept under the carpet) the eventual cost of rectification and / or contractual obligation fulfilment. Right first time isn't just advertising bullshit: it's presence of mind practised only by experienced personnel who are not only watchful of immediate occurrences but intensely mindful of the preceding presence... **of things to come**.

What a good engineer can do for one pound and what a **mediocre** engineer can do for one pound are worlds apart. And out of every ten engineers in a room, **seven of them will have cost their company's dearly** one way or another: and yet, will still be very nice people.

A good engineer therefore, is someone with extended vision; someone who can see into the fog down the road - comprehending what mere mortals cannot and thinking in the longer terms of... **what if**.

A **mediocre** engineer, being pressured by an errant manager, might not give a damn one way or the other what happens to the bottom line in six months time: he'll still get his mortgage paid regardless. Something that fits in very well with present - **do it quick and keep it cheap** - ideologies.

A clear mind may see that a **mediocre** engineer plus a harassed manager in a hurry equals the potential for something very nasty coming back to haunt the company later on. And the litigation machine just loves the thoughtless leading the mindless blindly on past the point of no return. But don't you worry about that because the **mediocre** engineer and his overstressed manager probably haven't worried about it either. They have more immediate problems biting them. And the growing trend of future analysis of poorly orchestrated past events – either productive, contractual or litigious - rarely seems to occur to anyone anymore. Not until sharp teeth penetrate the trousers... **that is!**

To round off now here's a little insightful story about **time bombs** that may or may not give you food for thought. If it doesn't then... well: what can I say – apart from - actual common sense is a precious and rare commodity - **and there's absolutely nothing universally common about it at all**.

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So important are these insights that they were originally laid down as a series of meaningfully explicit laws. To give them their formal title they're called Murphy's Laws. Now it is said that, in the sixth century an Irish king of great wisdom and observation, who also happened to be a student of human nature, recognised patterns of behaviour in his appointed ministers of a consistently re-occurring nature.

Thankfully, King Murphy was no-body's fool: and neither were his ministers. They had all been carefully selected for their positions on technical merit. They were not friends or relatives: as so easily could have been the case. They really could do their jobs within their particular skill sets. But something was not quite right as problems from past activities kept drawing their attention away from performing in the present and planning for the future.

This was now becoming more than a worry as it was clearly inhibiting growth potential: in fact, it was starting to hurt badly. It had to be nipped in the bud and quickly.

Murphy, being a mindful and astute - hands on - sort of managerial king had replaced all of the yes-men and doom and gloom merchants as quickly as they had been spotted. And what was left now was good, solid, working know-how. Direction and vision were supplied by the king himself and he knew that a happy and well cared for kingdom... ***was a loyal and successful kingdom.*** So something else was amiss. Something needed to be added or removed from the mix: but what?

Came the Monday morning - the weekly meeting of Kingdom Inc was to be the dawning of a fresh new age. King Murphy was ready and waiting for his troops.

"Ladies and gentlemen", he said calmly. "I love you all very dearly; after all it's you who keep me in the luxury I so richly deserve. So please listen to me with open minds as I'm going to give each one of you a companion to help you in your work". At this, a ripple of indignant bewilderment passed not too silently through the room. "Relax", said old Murph, not being one to employ someone and then contest their management decisions. "Your companion will simply be a large sheet of paper: it is to be positioned in your office where you cannot fail to see it. Not all of you will need it all of the time, but it will be there as a reminder for the unwary".

With this last remark the king passed to each of his ministers their new working companion: keeping one back for himself. "Because the buck stops with me", he said dryly, "I must have one as well". The king hung his on the throne... ***where he could not fail to see it.*** In large bright letters it read: -

STOP - LOOK - LISTEN

This is not going to be as easy as it looks.

This will take longer than you think.

This will cost more than you estimate.

If anything can go wrong with this, it will.

If anyone can successfully misunderstand you - they will - and you'll be blamed.

THINK TWICE - Nay!.. THRICE
THEN, WHEN YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY SURE - DO ONCE

King Murphy could see from the nodding heads, smiling faces and twinkling eyes that his fresh grasp of the situation wasn't falling on deaf ears and closed minds. And Kingdom Inc would soon have its house in order ready for a new - and uninterrupted – flow of business.

The moral of the story is... if you don't understand the story... *are you part of the problem?*

Just because life's a gamble doesn't mean that we have to put gamblers in charge of everything. It means that we actually have to prepare our game plan to shorten (or attempt to remove) the odds of being taken to the cleaners – often by the **mediocrity** of our own (*good, nice*) people.

Everything, **yes everything** can be distilled down to one thing – and that thing is... **what!**

What are you doing? **What** is the problem? **What** is the system? **What** are the requirements? **What** is the specification? **What** does the contract lock you into? **What** are you going to do about it? When you know the **what** of all things... you'll know **what** you should already have done, and, more importantly you'll know **what** to do next. And you'll also know **what** not to do in the future.

I don't have God like powers. I could never overcome **what** didn't want to be overcome: be it unresourceful, unresponsive people, poorly constructed systems or unattainable expectations. In life we can't cater for every eventuality. In business all you need concentrate on is... **the what of it!**

If you have a problem, do not allow yourself to be diverted from the seriousness of the task at hand by harbouring **unrealistic and untenable expectations** from the outset. There is great responsibility in making known the simple from the complex and attempting to resolve problematic situations characterised by uncertainty, disorder and indeterminacy. So get a firm grip on the situation... first.

Problematic situations require definition and analysis. The opening gambit is the discovery stage, which requires factual characterisation including peripheral situation appraisal and climate identification. Beginning with: **What** is happening right under our nose - right now – at this instant???

This is followed by dimensional identification and objective clarification. An important aspect here is the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the presiding authority in being a party in aid of solving their own problems. In lots of instances the presiding authority is both problem manifester and maintainer usually having committed themselves prior to establishing the financial veracity and viability of the venture. Especially in light of the endeavour coming unglued and responding with... **oops!**

And the last stage is - **if at all possible** - rectification. All of this is a time and cost incursion that could - **may should** - have been designed out of the loop at the outset.

However: ...such is life.

On the subject of **unrealistic expectations** I leave you with this thought: -

“...Nothing is impossible for the man who doesn't have to do it himself...”

Remember now that... while the best is the enemy of the good: the **mediocre** is everyone's enemy and sometimes it really can prove to be far more financially viable not to do something at all rather than to do it badly from day one... with **mediocre** personnel and / or **unrealistic expectations**.

Thank you for your time: believe me... **I know how valuable it is – but do you?**

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