

Expect Chaos

By Sue Dyer

MAN HAS SOUGHT to forecast the future since time immemorial. Can you imagine how the cave man must have looked upon the landscape to try and predict where his next meal might appear, or his next threat? Astrologers, fortune-tellers, economists and meteorologists all try to offer up “predictability” over what is to come. The problem with predicting the future is that we are – at each moment and with each effort – changing it forever!

Aviation has many ways that we try to predict the future and all we can do is assure ourselves that it is our “best guess” at best and will be WRONG. The larger and more complex your airport becomes, the less predictable things become and the chance for chaos grows exponentially.

This was the case at the opening of Hong Kong’s new airport, when seemingly small events joined together to produce a large, catastrophic effect.

The first flight was due in at 6:30 a.m., and red flags started appearing shortly thereafter. Around 8 a.m., a number of passengers had trouble finding and retrieving their luggage. The flight information display boards were blank or displaying incorrect information. To compensate,

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FLIGHT	ARRIVING FROM	STATUS
MW 1020	MOSCOW	CANCELED
PS 4038	PARIS	CANCELED
NK 9189	NEW YORK	CANCELED
FT 1234	FRANKFURT	DELAYED
BS 7639	BRUSSELS	DELAYED
SY 1740	SYDNEY	CANCELED
LN 1345	LONDON	DELAYED
AA 9826	ATLANTA	DELAYED
MD 4523	MADRID	DELAYED
BS 1845	BUENOS AIRES	ON TIME

whiteboards were put up, resulting in crowds mingling around the whiteboards. People coming to meet arriving passengers could not find their gates or determine their time of arrival; departing passengers had similar problems.

In the meantime, passengers were not provided the boarding gate numbers that are normally printed on boarding passes. So the whiteboards become more important and harder to access. The same lack of information affected the airline staff who didn't know where to report for duty. After getting off the plane, passengers waited hours for their baggage – if it could be found.

Three ramp handling operators were to take care of departure, arrival and transfer of bags. But when they had to get baggage off the planes there was no information on which carousel the bags were to be assigned. The baggage handling system could not read some of the tags. This led to around 6,000 bags lying around the baggage claim area.

And you thought you have had bad days! It is not an exaggeration to say that the airport was in pandemonium for several days.

The counterbalance to this was the opening of the San Francisco International Terminal 2. Everyone

knew the date for opening and they backed into all the milestones needed to activate the building for a successful opening.

The new baggage system was already certified well before the team did mock flights through the system to see where the bugs were so they could be resolved.

The concessionaires all met monthly to coordinate and assure that all the retail and food and beverage spaces would be ready to go on opening day. These partnering sessions included the concessionaires' owners, designers and contractors who met with the airport's



senior leadership and project leadership from the base building.

SFO's Terminal 2 opened to rave passenger reviews. One person said they loved it so much they wanted to "marry it"! Even today it yields the highest dollars spent per passenger.

So how in the heck can you begin to predict and manage complex organizations and complex projects so they don't "crash and burn"? The answer may be in learning how **you manage the inevitable chaos** that will occur. Here are some tips:

TIP #1:
Know Things Will Get Off Course and Make Course Corrections

When NASA sends a rocket into space it is only on target 5 percent of the time. The other 95 percent it gyros back and forth toward its target. When the rocket veers off course (which is most of the time), you can bet that is it not a surprise to NASA. They have feedback mechanisms that tell them where the rocket is at any given moment so they can make course corrections. What kind of feedback or accountability system do you have for your projects or organizational initiatives? A monthly project scorecard offers regular feedback and allows you to take the "pulse" of the project/initiative, then you can make course corrections to assure that you hit your target(s).

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You must seek out new ways to take the “vital signs” of your project at regular intervals...so that you can wrap your mind around the entire project or initiative, and steer it toward success.

TIP #2:

Tap Into the Collective Wisdom of Your Team

Having worked with more than 1,000 project teams, I have seen firsthand, and trust explicitly, that there is a “collective wisdom” in a team. This wisdom is available to help you to know what is needed to succeed, to know how to solve the problems that you face, to help you continuously improve. The wisdom is there if you ASK. Many project managers or leaders don’t ask because they feel they are “supposed to” have all of the answers and don’t want to show weakness. The truth is that we see problems only from our own perspective. Problems usually have many facets that we simply don’t see. Your team, focused on solving your problem, can offer breakthrough

ideas that will make you the hero. This is especially true for large or complex problems where knowledge resides in many different people.

TIP #3:

Maintain a Strategic Vantage Point

When you are down in the trenches all you can see is what is in front of you, behind you and the walls of the trench. It is impossible to steer your team to success from this vantage point. I remember visiting the island of Santorini in Greece. Up on the highest cliff they had carved marble “viewing” benches into the side of the mountain. From there they could see in all directions. They could see any threats that might be approaching from land or sea. They could see someone who might need help. They could tell how life was proceeding in the village.

In order to steer your team toward success you must have a strategic vantage point. This means you can’t be in the trenches. Many times, I see leaders and project managers getting lost in the details of a specific issue or requirement and losing their direction. When this happens, they can’t steer their team, nor can they see the impending crisis.

TIP #4:

A Two-Headed Cow Doesn’t Know Which Way to Go

Have you ever driven past a pasture of cows grazing on a hill? Have you ever noticed that they all face the same direction? They are a herd. They move as one unit. What would happen if there was a two-headed cow leading the herd? It would see two different paths and have two different ideas for how to proceed. How would it ever decide on what direction to go?

While this analogy may seem absurd, many teams with two or more leaders are being led in many directions at the same time. I also see many projects with NO discernable leader. There is no one in charge, no one who is the visionary, no one who has the authority to resolve the problems. Impending chaos is only part of the problem. This lack of leadership also creates “entropy,” meaning that instead of synergy you are actually losing momentum and wasting resources.

Chaos happens. It is a product of nature and will always happen. The larger the airport, project or initiative, the more chaos will be created. You can’t manage these efforts in the same manner as you have in the past. SFO uses the Collaborative Partnering process to get everyone heading in the same direction, and so the team can be nimble and adjust as things change. You must seek out new ways to take the “vital signs” of your project at regular intervals, such as with a Construction Scorecard, so that you can wrap your mind around the entire project or initiative, and steer it toward success. You must be able to see the overall “forest” and watch for any sparks that could burn down the forest! Just remember to expect chaos! <

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