

## WHY PROJECTS FAIL

*Graham Oakes calls for a reality check on every SOA initiative.*

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**Graham Oakes: keep in touch**

A colleague recently said that SOA project failures fall into three categories – governance, communications or technology – and in roughly equal proportions. I might argue about the percentages, but the classification seems useful.

For a start, the failure modes in each category are quite different:

- Governance problems stem from a failure to decide. Someone fails to take a decision, or to accept accountability for the consequences of a decision. This creates a vacuum, which gets filled by uncertainty, confusion or politicking.
- Communications problems, on the other hand, stem from a failure to listen. People say stuff but don't check that it's been understood. Or they don't seek feedback. Or they fail to consider the perspectives of key stakeholders. Eventually people's objectives and plans diverge, draining the project of momentum and buy-in.

- Technical failures are generally about understanding. We mis-estimate the capabilities of our teams or technologies, or we overlook the potential impact of technical complexity. This leads to us attempting to do stuff that simply isn't feasible within the constraints of our capabilities, skills, timeline and budget.

Underlying all of these, however, is a single failure mode. Projects fall apart when they fail to keep in touch with what's really going on. We overlook the decision vacuum and go on doing stuff that we hope will prove useful anyway. We ignore clear signs that people have different objectives, or that they're struggling to make the technology work, or that they're not progressing at the planned pace.

I've never seen a failed development project where someone on the team wasn't seeing clear symptoms of these problems long before the overall failure was obvious. And if the problems had been addressed at this early point, then the overall failure may well have been avoided. Yet the project continued as if all was well. The status reports said: "We're on plan."

Psychologists talk of a phenomenon called 'anchoring'. Once we get an idea into our heads, it colours our response to new information – we interpret what we see in light of the original idea. This is what happens with project plans. Once we've put so much effort into making the plan, we interpret the territory around us as if it still fits the plan. Even when we're hopelessly lost.

So how do we avoid this? I say: find people who aren't so invested in the plan to help us.

Someone with an outside perspective may be able to see the vacuums, divergences and misunderstandings that clutter our projects, when people who live with them every day have become inured to them. That's why I believe every SOA project needs an independent review team, keeping reality firmly in our sights.

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