



Are You Doomed? You are, if you don't speak up!

I read an article in a recent PM publication that stated 78% of employees across industries say they are working on a doomed project right now (source: 'Crucial Conversations Online Survey', VitalSmarts, February 2007). Additionally, only 10% of employees feel like they can speak up about impending project failures. Why do we as product managers tolerate this?

We all want to be on a winning team. We want to be associated with successes – quality, profitability, noted accomplishments – or whatever your definition of success is. We know that the advancement of our careers and our market value as project managers is based on successful project outcomes. As individuals with a basic human need to “make a difference,” we know we feel better about ourselves and sleep better at night when we are part of a successful project. Why, then, do we *sabotage* ourselves and our careers by not speaking up? Ethically, how can we continue to spend our employer's time and money working on a doomed project?

With so much at stake – our careers, our psyche, etc. – why do we *allow* ourselves to be associated with doomed projects? Are we all doomed?

I believe the ability and the *will* to communicate effectively is at the heart of this predicament. If people at all levels were able to communicate openly and honestly, project flaws could be uncovered and fully discussed and understood by those who need to hear it. Each of us can and should foster this type of open and honest communication within our teams and workgroups. But more importantly, as project managers, it is our duty to communicate and *influence* the requisite higher personnel, to steer projects to success – not just to meet time and cost concerns. Certainly, just drawing attention to “failure points” is a recipe for being branded “negative” and will not help your career nor your ability to influence others. Instead, project managers must be *solutions-oriented*. By this I mean we must seek out options and solutions to every failure point and present these in a positive light, and yes, go “out on a limb” when necessary, for the good of the project and all concerned.

Recommended remedies for doomed projects:

Pro-actively seek out multiple solutions to each issue. This often requires getting “up close and personal” with the project's technical details and niche experts working on the team.

Promote open and honest communications at all levels – within your project team and with all project stakeholders. This involves listening without being judgmental, showing everyone their input is not only welcomed but *sought after*, and documenting pros and cons of each solution option without interjecting emotion or bias.

Force yourself to step back at critical points and re-assess the project's progress and direction; then *communicate* this to the stakeholders. Circumstances and market conditions can change, and so what seemed like a wise course of action a couple of months ago, may now doom your project to failure.

Be willing to take a stance in which you may feel “out on a limb” for a short time, but which will increase the probability for success, and which will win you accolades in the long-run and increase your value to your employer.

Communicate in ways that show you have the same long-term goals as the project stakeholders and which instills confidence in your abilities to ferret out the best tactics to get there.

Are you doomed? You very well may be if you are unwilling and unable to *speak up* and do what is required to have successful projects. Always remember: time and budget are not the only barometers of success and oftentimes are not the most important things to manage!