

The Agile Blindside

by Esther Derby

esther derby
associates, inc.



Esther Derby
Executive Advisor

I'm passionate about creating work environments that truly enable and support your success. Feel free to call or email me for a complimentary mini consultation to explore potential opportunities to increase your capacity and support the success of your agile initiative. Just tell me what you think the issue is, and we'll start from there.

Managers need to know about problems so they can see patterns, find options and steer projects.

Agile project management depends on transparency and feedback. Visibility into the product and process is built in with iteration reviews and retrospectives. Task walls and Kanban boards make progress (or lack of it) and bottlenecks obvious. Stand-up meetings seek to raise impediments to management attention. But are managers ready to hear about these problems?

If organizations want to realize the benefits of agile methods, managers need to act on the problems that bubble up from teams, deal with unexpected events on projects and proactively find and fix problems that derail projects. Unfortunately, many managers behave in ways that communicate they aren't interested in solving problems—and ensure they won't learn of problems until it's too late.

“Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions.”

I suspect that managers who repeat this sentence believe it will encourage people and teams to solve problems on their own. But people don't approach their managers with problems they know how to fix and can solve (or believe they can solve). The problems they raise are ones they don't know how to solve, don't have the

organizational influence to solve or need some help to solve. What really happens when managers talk this way? Team members struggle in isolation or ignore problems, hoping they will go away.

Managers who tell people not to bring them problems ensure that they won't hear about small problems that are part of a larger pattern.

“Failure is not an option!”

Managers who rely on this exhortation ensure they won't hear about risks and issues. The phrase sends the message that success is a matter of character and will rather than the result of planning, observation, re-planning and course correction when something unexpected occurs.

Will and character are assets in any endeavor; however, they are not sufficient for success. Success requires removing impediments and proactively finding and ameliorating problem situations. Failure may not be an option that managers like, but it is always a possibility; ignoring that fact forces problems underground and makes failure more likely.

“The thought that disaster is impossible often leads to an unthinkable disaster.”- Gerald M. Weinberg

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“Get with the program or get off the bus!”

When managers give the impression that their minds are already made up, subordinates are less likely to bring up weaknesses, problems or alternatives. People fear that their concerns won't be heard. Worse, they fear (often with reason) being labeled as naysayers or whiners. Discourage people from shining the light on problems and they'll stop.

But managers don't need to be obvious in their discouragement; more subtle actions can also plug the pipe.

Interrupting

Interrupting a person who brings unwelcome news makes it harder for that person, who is already facing a difficult conversation. People interrupt for many reasons—excitement, the desire for more details, etc. But to the person being interrupted, a stream of interruptions can feel like an interrogation. Interrupting implies impatience—and that anything the interrupter has to say is more important than what the other person was about to say.

Ignoring Intuition

A couple of years ago, a friend felt uneasy about an action his manager was taking. He couldn't quite put his finger on why he felt concerned, but his feeling strong enough that he went to his manager—who dismissed his intuition, telling him, “Come back when you have some facts and we can have a

logical argument.” But the situation outpaced data gathering and blew up.

Asking for excessive proof and demanding data ensures that a whole class of complex and systemic problems won't come to attention early.

Non-verbal Cues

I coached a manager who furrowed her brow and tapped her pencil when people told her about problems. She was thinking hard. They thought she was irritated with them for bringing bad news. When there's a problem on a project, the earlier you know about it, the more options you have to mitigate the impact, make a course correction or re-set expectations. But you won't hear about problems if you plug the information pipeline.

“The problem isn't the problem. Coping with the problem is the problem.” – Virginia Satir

As much as we might wish there were no problems on projects, that's not the way the world works. Problems are a normal part of life. Managers need to know about problems so they can see patterns, find options and steer projects.

Here are three things you can do to make sure your information pipeline flows:

Tell people you want to hear about problems. Sounds simple—and it is. Assure people that you understand that nothing goes exactly as planned and you don't expect perfection. You may not want every problem dropped at your doorstep to solve—

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but if you act as if having problems is a problem, you won't learn about impediments and issues when they are small.

Learn how to listen. At a recent talk, a participant asserted that people from [fill a non-western country here] don't know how to say "no." This is not true. What is true is that many Americans don't hear it when people from different cultures say "no." The same is true for hearing about problems. If you want to build an early warning information system, you need to learn how to listen. That means refraining from interruptions. It also means listening for less obvious cues and what isn't being said. When there's a long hesitation preceding a positive statement, there's more to learn. If you don't hear any mention of risks or issues, delve deeper.

Teach people how to speak up. I don't want to clog the information pipeline by implying that I only want to hear about problems that have ready solutions:

The most important and dangerous problems don't have an obvious fix. Here's a framework that has worked for me. It provides useful information and an agreed-upon format that reduces the psychological barriers to raising issues:

"Here's my hunch..." This makes it explicit that I don't require excessive proof.

"Here's why you need to know about it..." This signals that I recognize that I don't know everything.

"Here's my data..." If there is data, it's good to know. And I've heard about intuition being born out enough that "I have a bad feeling about this" is good enough for me.

"Here's what I've considered or tried..." I do want people to think about the issue and I want to hear about their thinking. Problem solving is improved by multiple points of view.

Standard agile practices such as visible charts, frequent demonstration of working product, and retrospectives are all ways to make both progress and problems visible.

But if people don't feel safe to bring up issues, you won't hear about them until it's too late. If you take the actions outlined here, it will be easier for people to bring up problems to you. Problems are part of life—and projects. Pretending otherwise creates a culture for them to hide and fester.

This article originally appeared on gantthead.com