

Local Business



Cut Loose the Anchors By Stephen Balzac

“We need to take our time and carefully evaluate the situation.”

“We don’t have a lot of time and we need to move forward.”

Both of these statements were made about the same project by different sets of people. The first was made by a representative of a large company, the second by a representative of a much smaller company with which the larger company was working. The folks from the large company wanted to plan everything out to the last detail, avoid any possible errors, guarantee a perfect product, and not move forward until success was assured. The members of the smaller company, not having the financial resources of the larger company and being more personally invested, wanted to get the project started.

In any project, it’s important to evaluate the situation and determine the best way to move forward. However, in any non-trivial project, it’s impossible at the beginning to foresee every eventuality. When leaving on a trip, one attempts to plan for various contingencies such as traffic, weather, flight delays, and so forth; however, some things cannot be predicted either because they are too far off to see clearly or because changing conditions make long-term prediction unreliable. On the other hand, it’s foolish to set forth on a journey without making some effort to predict the possible pitfalls and plan for how to deal with them.

There’s an old saying that “no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.” While true, how and when the battle plan fails can provide valuable information about what is going wrong and how to fix it. That’s assuming, of course, the plan is designed correctly in the first place.

When planning a project, be it a battle, software development, a sales campaign, or just about anything else, the first step is always to understand how you’ll know when you’re at your destination. If you don’t know what success looks like in terms of the results you expect to achieve, it’s all too easy to take the wrong turn. Once you know what success is, only then can you identify what failure looks like.

Of course, success or failure is still a long way off. That means your descriptions will, of necessity, be more or less vague. In order to sharpen your focus, you need to identify several stopping points between where you are now and where you want to end up. When doing this exercise, it often helps to work backward from the end point. Those stopping points become your initial milestones and should be

sharper the closer they are to your starting point. A secondary goal of your milestones is to identify resources and dependencies and make sure they will be available or met at appropriate times.

For each milestone you must once again repeat the process of understanding where you are and how you’ll know if you didn’t get there. Your goal is not to avoid all possible errors, but to make sure you can identify errors as quickly as possible and be willing to cut your losses before you’ve invested too many resources down a non-functional path. When you’re uncertain which way to go, it often helps to explore several possibilities simultaneously. Some will be wrong, but if you cut your losses well, then you can save a great deal of time and may develop some novel or unexpected solutions. Walt Disney liked to have a dozen movies in production at once: he knew that half of them would flop, just not which half.

Once you have your milestones, you can get started. At each milestone, you need to evaluate your progress and adjust as necessary. What worked and what did not? Have unexpected problems cropped up? Are there external dependencies that may become a problem? It’s not about fixing blame but about understanding how to best allocate your resources and move forward. Mistakes are part of the game and initial guesses about how difficult tasks are or how long they might take are often wrong.

Once you’ve done all that, you’re still not ready to move forward to the next milestone. It’s important to take a little time and see what you’ve learned about your upcoming milestones. Have they come into sharper focus? Do they need to change? Have you discovered new dependencies needing to be taken into account or are there old dependencies that are no longer relevant?

While this may seem like a lot of work, with a little practice it becomes surprisingly easy. Once you understand your route and know how you’ll adjust it as necessary, cutting loose the anchors and moving forward is remarkably simple and even relaxing. You’ll reach your destination faster than if you rush forward without considering or planning for potential obstacles and much faster than if you never start.

Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com), an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses to increase revenue and build their client base. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com

Club Meetings/Notes

Ayer/Shirley Lions Club - General Meeting at the Nashoba Club Restaurant in Ayer on the 4th Monday each month. Social hour at 6pm/meeting 6:30pm. New members welcome.

Ayer/Shirley/Harvard/Devens Rotary Club meeting at the Bull Run Restaurant, Route 2A, Shirley, MA every Thursday at 6 p.m. For more info contact President Dave Swain at 978-425-4311.

Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club - The Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club meets on Thursdays at 12:15 at the Groton Country Club, Lovers Lane, Groton. Call Martha Campbell @ 978-448-1170.

Nashoba Valley Amateur Radio Club - meet on the third Thursday of each month, excepting July and August, at 7:30 PM at the Pepperell Community Center.

Pepperell VFW Ladies Auxiliary - 3rd Monday of the month at 6:30pm at the home post on Leighton St. Always looking for members, support and new ideas. email durno69@juno.com

Rotary Club of Lunenburg -Townsend - Mondays, except holidays, at the Bootlegger Restaurant, 50 Mass. Ave (route 2A) Lunenburg at 6:15pm. Call Jim Hays at 978-582-7235.

The Rebekah – Middlesex Lodge 176 - 1st and 3rd Tuesday each month at the Grange on Champney Street, Groton, Ma at 6:30 pm. We welcome everyone, you may contact: Natalie MacLeod @ 978-512-9738 or by email at sweetnatty58@hotmail.com

Townsend Lions Club - 1st Tues of the month at the Congregational Church meeting room 6:30p. Dinner meeting the 3rd Tuesday of the month at the Townsend House Restaurant at 6:30 pm. We welcome those interested in joining us.

Twin City Toastmasters: - Twin City Toastmasters meets every Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. at the Ronald M. Ansin Foundation Offices in downtown Leominster, MA. There is no fee for guests and you may attend as many times as you wish. For more info please call club president, Peter at (978) 227-0044.

Since its founding in 1924, Toastmasters International has helped four million men and women develop their public speaking skills and become confident communicators at work, at home, and yes, even at parties. Toastmasters now has approximately 200,000 members and 10,000 clubs in 90 countries. Twin City Toastmasters is one of more than 120 clubs in Massachusetts. www.twincitytoastmasters.com

Jokes from Carol ;-)

Bad Day and the Dwarf

I rear-ended a car this morning. I knew it was going to be a REALLY bad day. The driver got out of the other car, and he was a DWARF! He looked up at me and said, “I am NOT happy!” So I said, “Well, which one ARE you then?” That’s how the fight started.



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