The Apocalyptic Threat of Undead Projects

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Are there any of us who haven't been assigned to the "undead" project? You know, those projects that seem to go on forever without ever possessing the priority or proper resources to get finally to launch, or the ones that are constantly re-directed or re-defined such that we never make meaningful progress, or sometimes they just get put on hold, the back into action, then back on hold for eternity.

Have you ever considered the damage that such projects do to both business productivity and morale? None of us enjoy being assigned to the "zombies." We dislike it because we know that we are not set up to succeed and that all of our time and energy and effort are being wasted.

So if it's easy to recognize when our own efforts and potential are being wasted, why do we allow such projects to exist? How can we not recognize when we are wasting our business resources on a project that will never produce meaningful results? Worse yet, how can we observe that we are feeding these projects and still keep them in the queue?

The curses that spawn these living-dead projects are many. At the root of every one is some form or another of indecision. Let's put some of them into words so we can recognize in the future when we have accidentally enacted one of the common curses.

1. We borrow resources from large and long-term projects to enable short quick-win projects. The problem with this behavior is that every time we borrow resources, the project duration becomes even longer. The longer it goes, the less likely we are to continue to value it or remain excited about it,

and the less likely the opportunity we see today will still be there when we get close to finishing. Project importance is inversely proportional to how long the project lingers.

2. We don't prioritize our projects, or the project in question gets a low priority. If project leaders must fight for position in the queue or attention from certain functions or services, the leaders who shout loudest win. Otherwise, the projects with the most exciting prospects or the easiest tasks win. The project with the least exciting prospect, least pushy leader, or most undesirable demands gets constantly pushed to the back of the line.
3. We change directions. Any time we change directions, requirements, design elements, constraints, or resources such as team members, suppliers, external partners, or schedule or budget, we cause the project team to reset. This behavior often leads to the "Frankenstein's Monster" projects where the final solution is a hodge-podge of differing elements that don't quite fit together neatly. Not only does this monster fall into the same traps as #1 and #2 above, no one wants to launch the monster. The project lives forever in fix-it mode.
4. We don't properly resource the project. When we don't have the money or people to execute the project we scoped and set into motion, the project must constantly stop and wait for more or for resources to return. Again, by the time the project gets any sort of solution ready, the opportunity may have dwindled. Of course, projects with less opportunity when we finish than when we start often feed into curse #3 above.
5. We don't really believe in the project. Lamentably, sometimes we actually start projects that we don't really understand, or for which we don't really know the opportunity, or we just need to keep our resources busy until a really good project shows up. This should never happen if you have any sort of strategy or project pipeline, but for smaller, service oriented businesses, this happens between big clients. When we don't really want or need the project, it becomes a good candidate for any and all of the above curses.
6. Life happens, but we fail to adjust. Sometimes opportunities disappear or change and our projects no longer have the value with which they began life. Instead of euthanasia, we keep going. This often results from the reaction that we have already invested so much that we should at least finish it and try to get something out of it.

Do any of these behaviors or phenomena sound familiar? Do all of them? As I said, at the root of each of the above curses or causes for project "undeath" is indecision. I've often said that indecision is the greatest cause of waste.

We easily fall into the traps above, but we do not easily do something to correct the problem. Sometimes we simply don't perceive or otherwise consider the damage that zombie projects can inflict.

I may have over-stated the damage in the title by implying a potential apocalypse caused by zombie projects. I've not witnessed a business that went under because of one. However, one zombie project can easily infect others and the zombie disease can be shared between business units and teams that share or utilize the same resources. The damage can be greater than we intuitively guess. Let's

consider it.

Let’s consider the difficult decision of euthanasia first. It seems to be painfully common to keep a project going, even when we have decided that it isn’t going to pay out as much as we hoped when it began. We have already invested so much, shouldn’t we get something for our investment, even if it isn’t what we projected at the start? No.

What is spent is spent. Forget about it. Look at how best to use your current resources right now. We can finish project A in 6 months and return $300,000 in the first year, or we can start and finish project B in 9 months and return $950,000 in the first year. The best decision is obvious when we keep our perspective. Look forward.

Even if you can’t simplify the decision as suggested and you absolutely must put all the factors together, you won’t come up with another answer that is better. The more complicated we make the decision the more difficult it is to make a decision. Often we just cloud the issue and create argument instead. Often, when it comes down to the bottom line, we still come up with the same choice.

What else happens to us when we allow projects to linger in an uncertain state between life and death? As mentioned, those resources could be invested in more valuable projects, but what about other projects going on at the same time?

How much waste is created when projects with greater importance, value, or priority must wait for bottleneck resources behind the zombies? Every week that we delay is money lost. Consider the bottlenecks. We have suppliers, manufacturing teams, test facilities, regulatory authorities, technical writing teams, packaging engineers, distribution and retail groups, and quality assurance resources that all must decide where they will pay attention at any given time.

If the bottlenecks are addressing the zombie, they can’t address the more important or urgent projects. If the other projects are rightfully getting their turn first, then these resources don’t address the zombie, hence the source of the curse of “undeath.” Every time a team or equipment set or service must change subjects, there is a reset period. Reset time is unproductive, but necessary. We want to minimize resets, not create more.

When we steal resources from one project to enable another, again we generate resets, but we also encourage the Frankenstein’s Monsters and conflict or chaos as directions change, questions are asked, ideas are revisited, decisions are challenged, and information is recreated. If the resources that are stolen happen to be leaders on the sacrificial project, then the problems and waste become certain.

On the sacrificial project, direction and decisions will change as the leaders change. On the recipient project, leader personalities are most likely to inquire about and challenge the decisions and directions already in place. The result is change and waste in both projects as the newly adjusted teams reformulate before settling into a new rhythm.

When we make changes and trigger the reset process we sometimes react to the slowdown by adding even more resources in a mistaken belief that more people and resources will speed up the development. That belief holds true until you reach the correct number of resources. When we exceed that number, we slow things down again as we try desperately to communicate and keep resources busy instead of focus on what really needs to be done.

So, when we put too many resources on a project that is behind schedule, not only do we slow down our behind-schedule projects, we are not using those resources where they could be more effective. If we stole them from other projects that could be progressing, but are now crippled, we just created more zombie projects.

Finally, the least considered, but most damaging impact of the living-dead projects is morale. No one wants to be assigned to the doomed project. We like to succeed. We hate to fail. We hate being set on a course of failure that we cannot control. So, our people who realize they are on such a course take action to change course.

When we can’t get the project we are on properly prioritized or resourced or otherwise enabled, we decide to save ourselves. We beg, plead, argue, or, in some cases, manipulate until we get assigned to something else. Therefore, our own personnel become part of the phenomenon of changing resources and plans that propagates the undead curse.

Sometimes, when we can’t find a better future inside the organization, we look for better prospects outside the organization. Unfortunately, it is our best and brightest people who are most likely to find opportunities elsewhere. How much is an experienced and creative person worth to future products and business? How much is lost in the way of development productivity and replacement process by the unexpected loss of valuable personnel?

In short, the zombie projects, those that are not set up to truly succeed and are also not put to a merciful death, negatively affect everyone in the organization in some way. Even the leadership wastes time. Every manager has sat in a meeting unproductively asking and answering questions concerning the zombies.

What is that project worth? Why is it behind schedule? Why is it in testing when this other project could be in testing? Who is leading it? Do we need a more competent team to get it back on track? Can we take resources from it for other projects? Who allowed that to happen? Isn’t that the same report we had last month? Why isn’t it moving forward? What is the problem?

The questions go on forever without meaningful resolution and, once cursed, there are only two solutions that will save the project and the business from further torment. We can properly resource and prioritize the project, set it up for success and leave it alone so it can finish, or we can kill it.

Chances are the reason it is lingering in a state of half-life is because it just isn’t important enough to share the queue with the other projects and opportunities.

That means that a merciful death is the right thing to do. When you decide on euthanasia, be compassionate.

It is very, very important to remember that as much as we have talked and decided for the business in terms of efficient use of “resources,” those resources we are discussing are people! Those people have bled and struggled to succeed in spite of our leadership failure. Some of them still believe in the project and the solution they strived to develop.

When we callously announce that the project our people have devoted themselves to is officially dead, we not only kill the project, but we kill morale. We may as well say to our people, “We don’t care, go ahead and find someplace else to work.” We spend so much time grooming our people to fit in the culture, to understand the processes, to work well as teams. To be callous, we don’t want to waste that effort. In true leadership terms, we value our teams more than that.

When we announce the decision to execute the zombie we must be compassionate. Accept blame for not setting the project on a course of success; do not let the failure fall on the project team that devoted itself to success in spite of us. Acknowledge the innovation, creativity, effort, and devotion of the team members. Thank them for it and ask their forgiveness as they re-devote their efforts to different projects.

It may be that we don’t see clearly the harm that the on-going, never successfully finishing, marginally important projects, cursed to a neither living, nor dead, fate have on our business, our teams, and our overall performance. Maybe we just don’t have the courage to tell the teams and believers that they are working on a doomed project. Many times we fall into the trap of convincing ourselves that we must finish what we started just to get something, anything for our efforts.

Whatever the reasons, we harm our organization in numerous ways by letting the undead, zombie projects to consume our energy and resources. We also risk the curse of “undeath” to spread to other projects or business units. The damage easily grows.

We must learn to recognize the zombie projects and either lift the curse that afflicts them, or put them to a merciful death. Take some time this week and look at your project portfolio. If you see a zombie on the list, work with your leaders to do the right thing. Your leaders and your personnel will thank you in the end, and your business will be healthier.

Stay wise, friends.

If you like what you just read, find more of Alan’s thoughts at www.bizwizwithin.com [1].

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