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(Partly adapted from…)

Mini-muddling: Learning from project plan deviations

(Hällgren & Wilson, 2007)

Markus Hällgren, Ek.lic.
Umeå School of Business
Markus.hallgren@usbe.umu.se

www.markushaellgren.com

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Agenda

- About me
- Planning & Deviations
- An empirical example
- ”Where I come from”
- Projects
- Learning as community or individual?
- Some food for thoughts!

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About me...

- M.sc., Ek.lic. in Business Administration
- PhD student at Umeå School of Business
- Teaches and develops project management courses online
- E-voting consultant
- … and love trekking!

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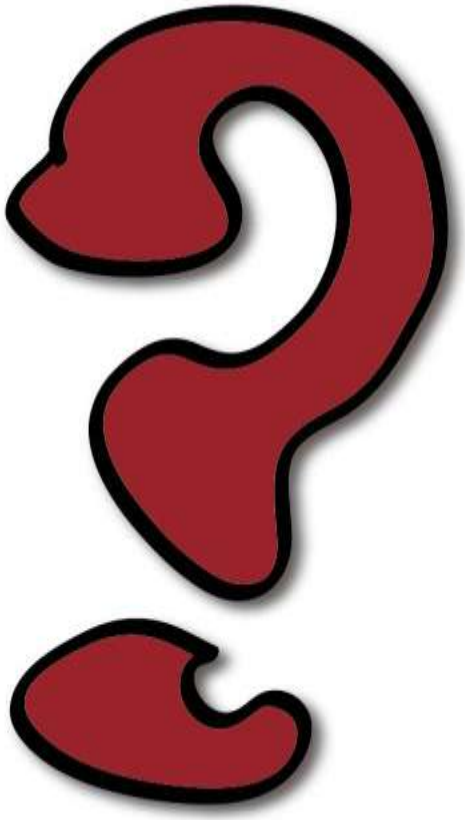
Learning from deviations



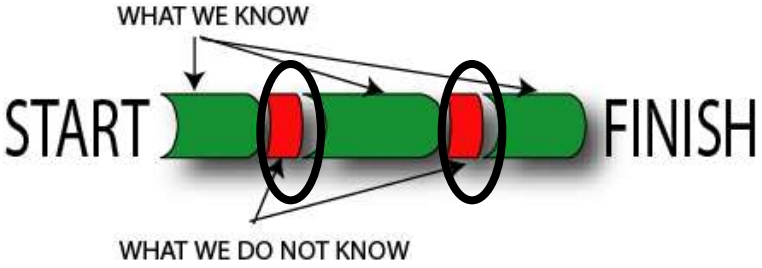
→ ”Project management – it is all about deviations and changes!”

Need to adapt to changing circumstances suggests that there is informal and accidental learning taking place

→ **HOW DO YOU LEARN FROM THE UNEXPECTED?**

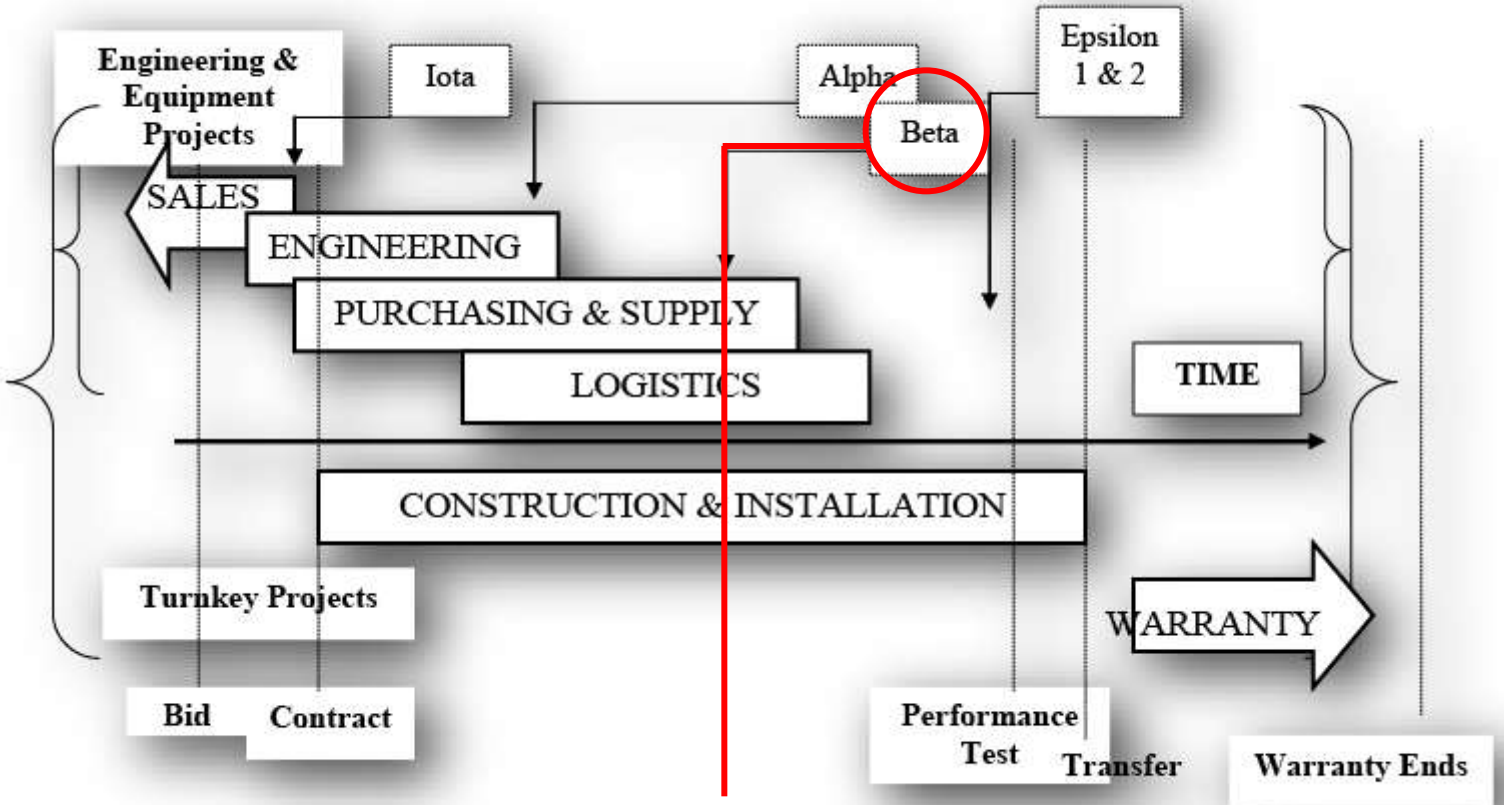
Planning for the unexpected

- What are plans for?
  - Plans represents regularities in projects – what we think we know about the future
  - The ”non-regular” represents what we do not know which creates uncertainty (and deviations)



- Do we generally learn new things when we are repeating same behavior over and over again?
  - Probably not. We are confirming what we already know!
  - Thus, deviations are saying that there is something we did not know, could not handle, or could not foresee!

The projects

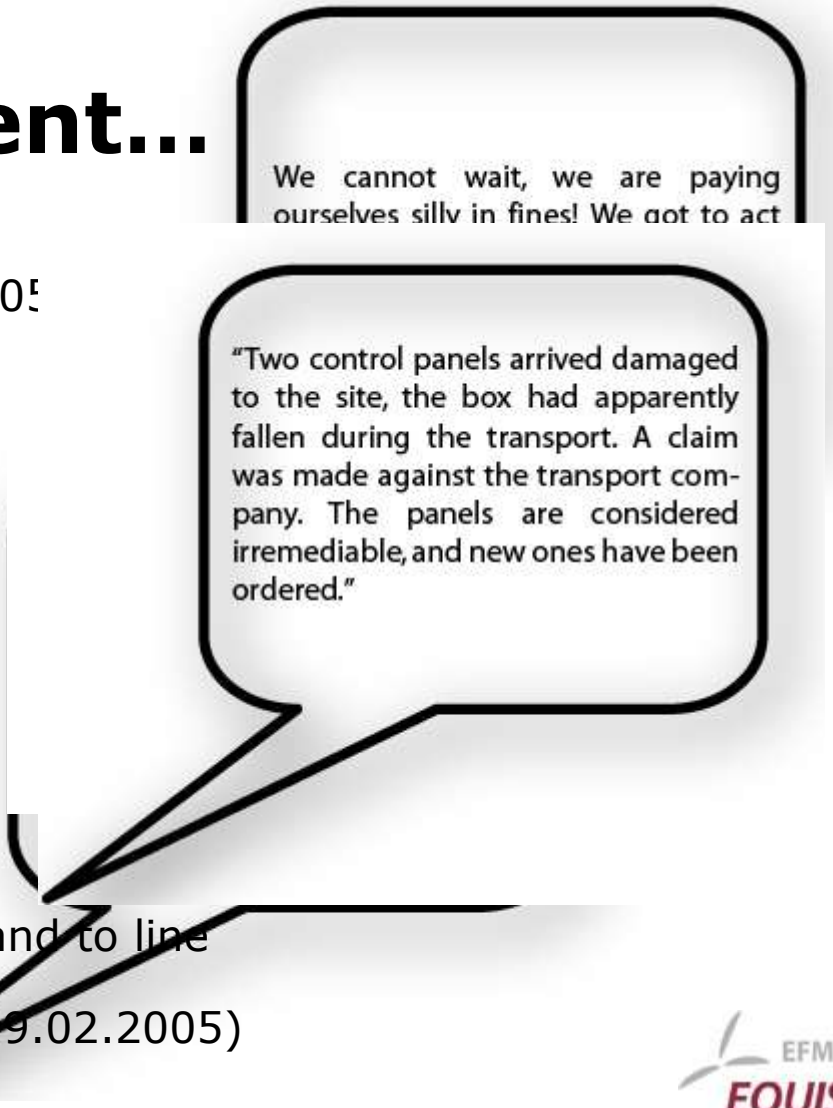


Management of deviations

Situation:

Broken equipment arrives at site and threaten to delay the nine month project by three months

The broken equipment…



- Equipment found to be broken (17.01.200
- Emails, and discussions, to and with…
  - Site management
  - Line management
  - Logistics sub-contractor(s)
  - Insurance company
  - Equipment manufacturer
  - Inhouse services (transportation, legal)
- Insurance claim (18.01.2005)
- The equipment is beyond repair (19.01.2005)
- Re-planning of activities at site
- ”Dummy pieces”
- Flow of information
- Monthly meetings and reports from site and to line management (January, February, March)
- Formal complaint to logistics company (09.02.2005)
- Formal meeting (16.02.2005)

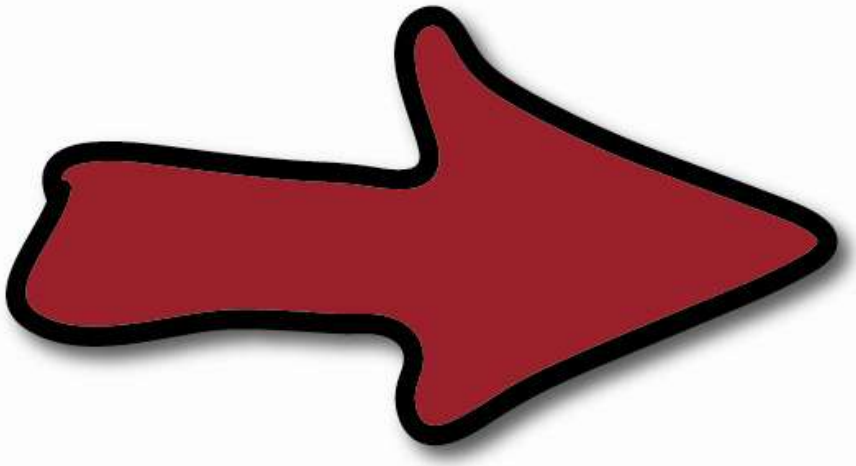
What was the focus?

- … find information
- … resolve the deviation
- … continue with the project
- … limit costs
- … report progress

The damaged equipment from a mini-muddling perspective

- Repair the equipment at site or replace it
- Iterative decision making with unclear consequences
- Many participants who analyzed the feasability of the solutions

Consequences



- The most obvious and common solutions are investigated
- Revolutionary solutions withheld, safeguarding ”status quo”
  - Old knowledge and routines reaffirmed
- Speed and short term goals trumps ”the best”. Equals ”Good enough”
- A network-based individual-dependent solution which positively contributes to the solution of the deviation

Possible knowledge depositories

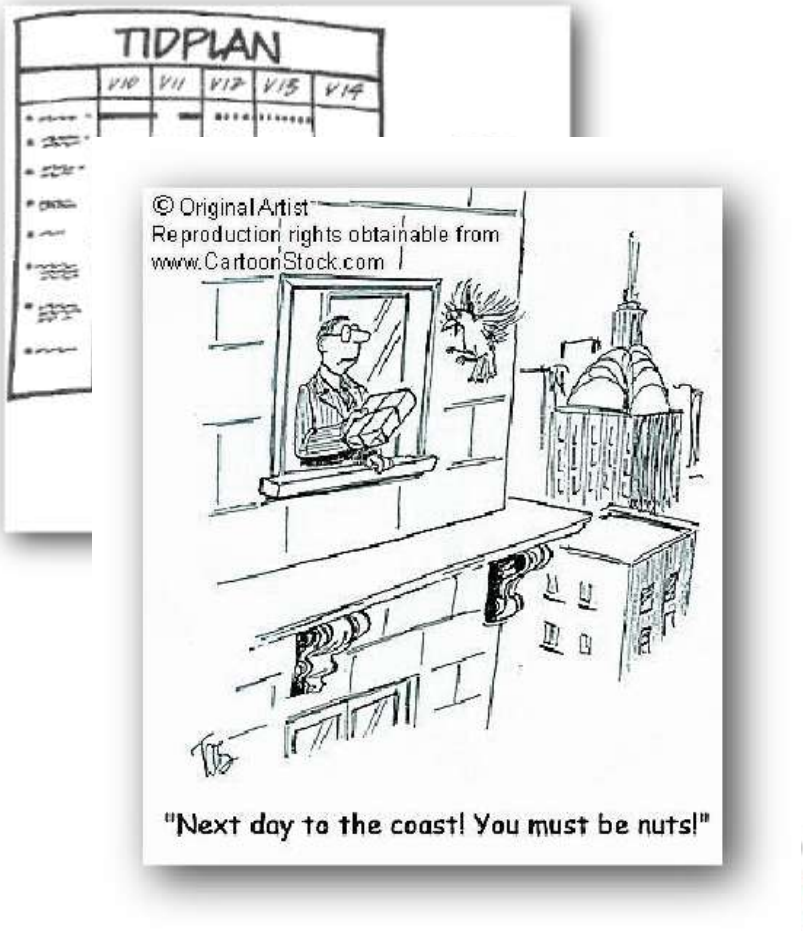
- Emails
- Claims
- Project plan
- Monthly reports
- Monthly report meetings
- Individual network & knowledge

- On the other hand…
  - at no point was the intranet accessed,
  - previous claims referred back to,
  - the project plan reflecting the changes updated,
  - previous reports utilized or,
  - previous emails viewed

- But. They *did* use…
  - The project engineers and individual network(s) (inhouse services and competences)
  - Report meetings

Projects...

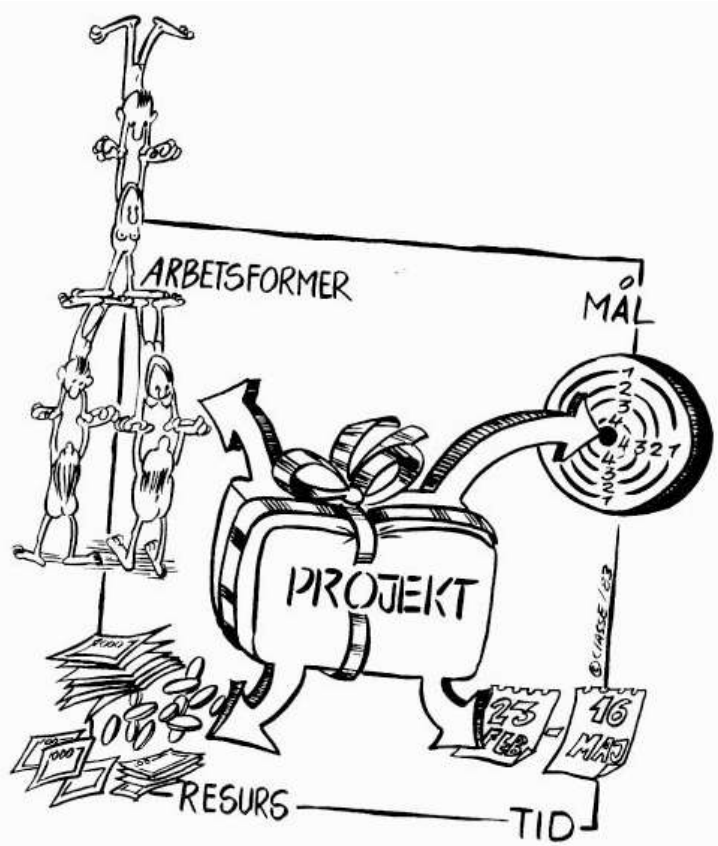
- Projects are efficient – they get things done!
- Projects allows for deviations to be managed expeditiously and flexibly
- Project management provide means for control
- Notoriously known to have problems with learning
  project – project
  project – organization



”Learning the practice”

- ”Communities of Practice”
  Tightly knit groups which have been practising long enough to develop a cohesive community with relationships of mutuality and shared understandings
  (Brown & Duguid, 1998, Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000)

- Projects on the other hand…
  - …consists of people that have not necessarily met before
  - …requires swift socialization
  - …consists of individuals with specialized competences
  - …got a pre-specified task
  - …got set limits of time and cost
  - …are solution oriented rather than process (learning) oriented
  - … are constantly interrupted (by deviations)



Food for thoughts

- Deviations will occur
- Deviations are not lack of knowledge it is the impossibility of estimating a future that is yet to come!
  (and that is where risk and change management becomes insufficient)
- Distributed individual knowledge rather than community knowledge
  - Individual knowledge (*what* you know)
  - Organizational knowledge (*who* you know)
  - Social knowledge (*how* you get along)

- Be prepared!
- Allow failure and openess, vertically and hierarchically
- Change peoples position within the organization
- Provide ”Meeting opportunities”
- Competence developing courses may be more valuable than knowledge systems (and far more cheaper!)
- Impact on who you should hire. Social, curious and technically competent people are (of course) the best

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How could we facilitate individual learning in projects?

- Four groups – Four questions
- 10 minutes/station
  - Group 1 comes up with conclusions.
  - Changing station, the second group, and subsequently the third group, tries to develop the conclusions.
  - The last group on each station presents the results for the entire group
- Discussions

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The questions…

Group 1

- Where do you (or your organization) find the necessary knowledge to solve technical problems encountered during project execution? (own exeriences and training, colleagues, consultants, books, other). Please specify and explain.

Group 2

- If unexpected events happen during your (or your organization) project, where do you turn for help - to colleagues, managers, customer - please specify and discuss if the options for assistance are appropriate for your needs. Could there be more done in terms of creating a better environment for support during project execution?

Group 3

- Obviously you (or your organization) is managing deviations quite well, otherwise you would not still be in the business. However, what barriers to learning from deviations do you see in your daily work with projects? (time constraints, inflexible knowledge management systems etc.) Please specify and explain.

Group 4

- In your project (or your organization) what is the dangers of a tight project schedule in terms of knowledge produced and how deviations are solved? What are the long term consequences and what do you (or your organization) do in order to prevent these effects? Please specify and explain.

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Thank you for listening!

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