Starting with a Bigger Boat

by Lyn Ryan

Remember that moment in the movie *Jaws* when you first see the shark? After several terrifying attacks at the tourist beach of Amity, shark hunter Quint, police chief Brody and marine biologist Matt Hooper set out in Quint's boat to capture the perpetrator. Brody is laying a chum line when the enormous shark suddenly and silently looms up behind the boat. A horrified Brody gulps and announces, 'You're gonna need a bigger boat!'

Failure takes no preparation

There is a often a tendency amongst fellow project workers to start work on the project before doing any planning, before estimating how big the problem is doing any planning, or before marshalling the appropriate resources to deal with the problem. I suspect, out of the noblest of motives, project members who are sensitive to the pressure of the ticking clock, immediately leap to a solution and want to start building or implementing it.

Very few people would start building a house before getting some plans drawn up, or before surveying the land to check whether they can build successfully on that land. Would you pick out carpets before you have planning permission? Is there anyone who would start building before they actually own the land? Yet I see this happen all the time in the project world. People start working on a project before the contract to begin is signed. I can't tell you how many times I have seen a project member start designing or even building detailed parts of the solution before the whole structure of the solution is clear, agreed or documented.

Worse than this, often building small pieces of the solution actually becomes the default plan. Someone starts somewhere and builds a piece that seems right to them. Meanwhile other people do the same. Lots of activity takes place. Each little piece is great. However, in the end, unless you were using Lego, you have lots of little pieces that don't fit together and don't even come close to resembling any sort of solution to the original problem.

It's no surprise that when the shark leaves them in peace for a few hours, Quint, Brody and Hooper retire to the ship's galley to drink and compare their scars. Likewise, any person who has worked on projects for any length of time will be able to tell you about colossally failed projects and share plenty of anecdotes about project stupidity. I think many of these failures can be attributed to a lack of analysis and planning at the beginning.

Be prepared to be prepared

All planning is difficult and maybe this is another reason why many project participants want to skip it. For larger and complex projects, planning is very hard indeed. Be prepared to create many versions of the plan before the project is complete finished because things will change and assumptions will shift constantly.

What makes planning all that much harder is that you need to be prepared for other people's derision. Just as Quint laughs at Hooper's scientific preparations to capture the shark, other people can also be dismissive of analysis or what they see as too much time spent in planning or too much thinking and not enough action.

Starting with a Bigger Boat, Continued

How much analysis and planning is enough?

The outcomes of detailed analysis and planning can be dismissed as 'over-engineering'. It is a cheap shot because it is surprisingly hard to defend against. It implies that solution is so simple and achievable that the level of analysis and planning cannot be justified. Bear in mind that many people mistake simplicity for a lack of thought, whereas to arrive at clear, succinct conclusions often takes a lot of detailed work and thought.

Interestingly some things cannot be touched with the over-engineering taunt. Have you ever sat in a plane and thought this aircraft is a bit over-engineered? Goodness me, that heart monitor looks far too comprehensive? There are just too many fail safes on that public transport signalling system? Somehow I doubt it. Yet spend a couple of weeks planning a project that might employ 10 people for 6 months, cost several million dollars and attempt to achieve several complex outcomes, and some people have been known to sneer.

Projects fail for a myriad of reasons. I have worked on projects for various clients that suffered from 'haphazard' analysis, where some parts of the solution are described in detail while others are missing or scantily represented. No one knew this was a risk. No-one investigated whether the technology could perform this task. I have experienced faltering actions by team members when the initial project plan fell out of touch with reality and was not updated in a timely way. I have seen much misguided action and poor communication in projects through lack of direction because there was no overall plan. However, I don't think I have ever seen a project fail because too much time was spent in planning and analysis.

Conclusion

Projects rarely have such life and death consequences those as in movies, and they always suffer if you don't put in some time planning and thinking first. Planning is not wasted time, it is time invested in being sure that you have the correct solution and all the elements are in place to succeed.

And what if you find that your original assumptions were incorrect, and you have the wrong solution? Well, here is where time spent in planning gets the biggest return. This is the time when you have actually saved the organisation you are working for the most money because you have avoided embarking on a project and spending large amounts of money on something that will definitely fail.

I think we all know Brody's feeling of dread when the full scope and size of the problem is revealed in one horrifying flash. Usually it's often one of those 3 o'clock in the morning, sit-bolt-upright-in bed-with-heart-pounding moments. So, unless you want to go *mano-a-mano* with the monster as you go down with the ship having lost all your crew, my advice is spend some time planning before you leap into the boat.