



Avoiding strategic surprises: beware of the lurkers!

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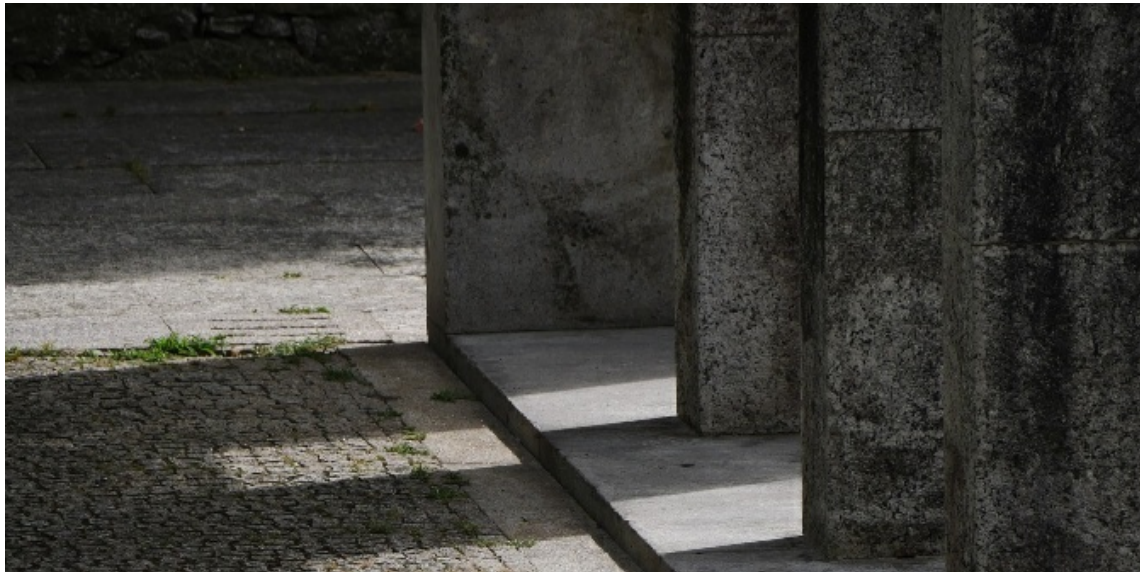
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Avoiding strategic surprises: beware of the lurkers!



Usually, we talk about two types of surprises in strategic projects: those that hit you like a flash out of a blue sky, and those that creep up on you, nudging you off track, bit by bit. Either type requires a specific approach to manage – efficient contingency plans and crisis response for the former, improved monitoring and detection for the latter. However, when we started to investigate surprises in projects by running workshops with project and strategy practitioners and analysing the academic literature, we discovered a third class of surprises: the lurkers!

We observed that the most bothersome surprises were those that had been hiding in plain sight from the beginning. They were not related to a slowly deteriorating environment that leads the project off course, nor were they unforeseen (or maybe foreseen but forgotten) events that suddenly strike the project. Lurking surprises relate to general or fundamental assumptions that we make about the world, the project, or us – assumptions that later turned out to be wrong.

These fundamental assumptions lead to plans that are flawed from the beginning. You thought it was just a straightforward IT project and failed to see what it really is: a messy change project that affects the whole organisation. You thought it was just your run-of-the-mill construction project, but actually, it is unusually complex. Or: you thought that your Korean engineers had the same ideas of project management as their Danish colleagues – yet, your 'standard' labels and names bear entirely different meanings for those two groups.

These types of surprises, flawed assumptions about what the world is like, are incredibly common – but very hard to manage. The problem with these lurking surprises is that they lie at the foundation of how we plan, for what we plan, and how we perceive deviations from the plan. Being that fundamental, you cannot simply change these assumptions without creating a cascade of effects in the project or organisation.

Changing a truly fundamental assumption about who we are and what we do is painful and does not come natural to most of us. Thus, when things start to deteriorate, organisations often bark up the familiar, yet wrong tree, asking "How can we get back on track?", rather than exploring the painful question: "Should we even be on that track?". Or, we start blaming the stupidity of the actions of others, rather than questioning whether they might see the world more clearly than we do. When, eventually, fundamental assumptions change within a project or organisation, this sometimes comes critically close to converting to a new faith – and heads *will* roll.

Overall, we saw that rectifying these assumptions happens through a rollercoaster of misaligned understandings within organisations, producing phases of confusion in which time, resources, and momentum are lost. So what can you do?

Let us start with a piece of bad news: more planning will not save you. Certainly, you will identify and address a few more issues by more diligence in the front end; however, too much planning creates unintended side effects. The more you plan, the more entrenched you get in the assumptions around the plan, the more emotionally attached to the plan you will be, and in consequence, the harder it will become challenge (wrong) assumptions and let the plan go. Instead of treating the plan as what it is – an idea about the future – we start treating it as a blueprint for what the world is supposed to be. Experienced project managers therefore often report that they abolish detailed planning in favour of rougher road maps featuring only the most important milestones. The rise of agile in industries beyond IT indicates that more and more organisations realise the need for adaptive methods, rather than rigorous long-term planning.

So what to do instead, if not plan more? The answer, as so often for challenging managerial issues, relates to culture and communication – and does not have a simple technical solution. To avoid being surprised by flawed fundamental assumptions, you have to enhance your organisation's capabilities to continuously update your understanding of the world, both as individuals and as teams or groups. To do so, ask yourself the following:

- Are you even aware of the assumptions held across the organisation? Over time and whispered through the grapevine, assumptions of some become the perceived facts of others. In our workshops, we observed that the project teams often had diametrically different perceptions than their managers regarding what makes the project critical.
- What were the faulty assumptions that you defend most tenaciously? What was necessary to overcome them? Many organisations develop their own set of specific blind spots that make them particularly vulnerable.
- How is opinion leadership distributed within your organisation? Do a few select individuals create a canonical interpretation of the project, the organisation, or the world, which goes unchallenged – or does your organisation provide room for competing assumptions? Often we discovered that at least some people in the organisation did not agree with the dominant narrative yet were not heard until worse comes to worst.
- How do you cope with being wrong? Is it safe for people in your organisation – both for their career and their emotional wellbeing – to admit that they have had wrong assumptions? Or is admitting that you are wrong worse than being wrong – as long as you can keep blaming others?

We have published [a \(free\) workshop guide](#) that collects the practices that worked the best for us and the organisations we worked with to manage surprises. It is designed to help you discover specific action points for improving your planning, monitoring, and communication practices.

A bit of good news at the end: In our experience, effective ways to identify and manage surprises are as varied as surprises themselves. But putting the topic on the agenda gets you halfway to avoiding – and better managing – surprises.



Notes:

- The research reported here was carried out at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU), Engineering Systems Group and supported by the [Brightline Initiative](#).
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