Seven Words You Can Never Say on a Flailing Project

Stand-up comedy is a short-lived profession. It requires quick wit and impeccable timing to deliver a steady stream of laughs to a short-fused audience. Comics are at the mercy of the audience, deftly playing off their disposition and predilection. Stand-up comedy is definitely not for the faint of heart; even the best comics burn out or decay. Some, like Richard Pryor, Lenny Bruce, and John Belushi implode. Others, like Eddie Murphy, Roseanne Barr, and Tim Allen go stale. The smart ones transition to more secure jobs like sitcoms (Jerry Seinfeld) or movies (Steve Martin). Few have long, productive careers in stand-up.

One exception is George Carlin, who passed away June 22 at age 71. Carlin had a remarkably long career of 50-odd years in stand-up. Sure, he had dry spells as Mr. Conductor and the narrator of Thomas the Tank Engine; nevertheless, stand-up was his staple, spanning generations. His genius was making you think while you laugh; for example, "... if crime fighters fight crime and fire fighters fight fire, what do freedom fighters fight?"

Carlin transformed stand-up comedy by introducing a subversive approach aimed at the hypocrisy in our daily lives. He produced a rich body of work covering a diverse variety of issues, but sadly he will be remembered most for the seven words you can never say on television.

Project managers, especially software project managers, share similar pressures with stand-up comedians. Good software project management requires quick wit, impeccable timing, and consistent delivery to touchy customers. It is definitely not for the faint of heart or half-hearted.

Rather than tender yet another list of software best practices, I offer an elegy to projects in trouble with the seven words you can never say on a flailing project. You never get that list. It's typically learned by trial and error, but I'll save you the pain. The words are: grit, bliss, instruct, blunt, customer, milestone, and wits.

Let's start with GRIT. Never say grit on a flailing project unless you are referring to abrasive granules. Avoid the grit of indomitable spirit and firmness of character – Rooster Cogburn grit, true grit. True grit implies project leaders that possess the tenacity to inspire and the courage to hold accountable. Settle for cheerleaders, task masters, or bean counters – but never true grit.

Never associate BLISS with a flailing project. Bliss is an unusual word for any project. Carlin inquired, "If lawyers are disbarred and clergymen defrocked, doesn't it follow that electricians can be delighted?" You, in turn, may ask, do engineers actually like projects that offer a challenge and sense of accomplishment? Yes, indeed, your staff became engineers because they like to build and are blissful building things that captivate, fascinate, and intrigue. Nip that in the bud. Introduce a slow burn of inanity, monotony, and mental torpor to draw oxygen out of the project, avert any bliss, and leave the project in pure engineering hell.

Never utter the word INSTRUCT on a flailing project. Autodidactic managers and engineers agree: they don't need no stinkin' instruction. Managers believe instruction wastes time; time is money and money is short. Engineers see instruction as a waste of time, time that should be spent with thingamajigs, doohickeys, and doodads that intrigue the mind. If you instruct, you impart knowledge. Imparting knowledge leads to mutual understanding. Mutual understanding could lead to direction, purpose, objectives, common processes, and collaboration. The next thing you know, project destruct will become project construct because you dared to instruct. Keep your head in the sands of credulity.

On a flailing project, you can never be BLUNT. Blunt will only invite the four horsemen of flourishing projects: realism, directness, honesty, and frankness. Imagine the shock you would impose if requirements were realistic and clear, plans direct and uncomplicated, budgets honest and pragmatic, and project communication frank and straightforward. Imagine the hurt feelings and bruised egos. Imagine the nerve-racking decisions and arduous trade-offs. For the love of political correctness, you can't allow that to happen. Play it safe. Remain idealistic, apposite, and equivocal.

CUSTOMER? What customer? Never mention the customer on a flailing project. Involving the customer will complicate things – after all, they can't even congeal requirements? In today's society, customers should drive up, order, pick-up, and drive off. No questions asked. Do not be appeasers. Leave your customers out of the loop.

If you find yourself on a flailing project, never bring up the word MILESTONE. After all, a milestone is a stone, stones weigh you down and milestones weigh you down with accountability. Why gild the lily with measures and meetings? Who wants to know where your project really stands? Who needs course corrections? If you must have milestones, choose one and only one; and at all costs avoid the milestone's progeny – the inchstone.

Finally, never, under any circumstance, allude to WITS on a flailing project. Nothing subjugates a project faster than astute team members who perceive relationships between seemingly incongruous or disparate concepts, designs, and processes. Top talent is expensive, headstrong, and hard to control. Stop dreaming of a *deus ex machina*. Save money with desultory, nebbish, dilatory engineers. They will validate your best guesses and ensure your worst fears. Follow Carlin's advice, "Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups."

I apologize to managers in control and command of their software projects. This article offers you little. With time on your hands, maybe you can solve Carlin's greatest conundrum, "When someone asks you, 'a penny for your thoughts' and you put your two cents in, what happens to the other penny?"

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