

Avoiding the 'Tipping Point to Failure'

Delivering 'on the promise' to meet client and stakeholder expectations requires project organisations that are capable of accomplishing the work!

Whilst this statement is obvious, most organisations remain blissfully unaware of Gladwell's tipping point. The tipping point marks the boundary between linear changes and catastrophic change and unfortunately, it is impossible to predict where a tipping point may occur until after it has been reached.

The reason this is an important consideration for all project managers and project organisations is that leading up to the tipping point, increases in project complexity have predictable increases in difficulty and the situation is manageable. Once the tipping point is reached, the situation flips from predictable and manageable to unmanageable within the current context. New paradigms are needed to first stabilise the situation, then recover. But there is no fixed point for the change; the tipping point is influenced by the capability of the performing organisation and its people and the degree of complexity of the work they are asked to accomplish.

The degree of complexity associated with the work of the project increases exponentially and is influenced by a combination of its inherent size, technical difficulty, intensity, and the surrounding stakeholder relationships. The complexity quotient¹.

The performing organisation can manage a level of complexity based on its prior experience, maturity, supporting systems and the capability of the people managing the work. And as long as the 'complexity quotient' is within the management capability of the organisation and the people it deploys, reasonably predictable outcomes can be expected and normal project control practices are likely to be effective.

Change any of these parameters to the point where the overall tipping point is reached and there is a sudden breakdown that causes a significant negative change in the likely project outcomes. Recovery is no longer a simple process of marginally increasing the resources deployed, what's needed is a massive change in the capability of resources.

The tipping point is not fixed for any organisation, by developing improved systems and acquiring experience the organisation can grow to be capable of managing larger, more complex projects. The challenge is to achieve this growth without running into a tipping point. I'm not sure how you can predict an inherently unpredictable point but I suspect there is a build up in sudden and erratic changes in schedule and cost variances and short term predictions of work that will be accomplished in the next 2 to 4 weeks will become increasingly unreliable.

Any thoughts anyone???

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¹ For more on the four dimensions of overall complexity see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1072_Project_Size.pdf

