Beating Murphy's Law

By Phil Ramsey

How many projects have you embarked on, only to find progress was interrupted by unforeseen events? Has that happened in your school or centre? If you've experienced this kind of frustration, you are not alone. Project management experts estimate that the majority of major projects run in organisations either go over time or over budget, or both. In their book *How Big Things Get Done* (see the Book Review in this newsletter), Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner present evidence that less than 10% of projects are completed on time and on budget, and of these many don't produce the benefits that were expected.

It seems that Murphy's Law holds true: that if something can go wrong it will. Unexpected events always seem to come along. But while events like the COVID pandemic may be unpredictable, Flyvbjerg says that what is predictable is that something is going to come along. And because of that there are things you can do - lessons you can learn from successful projects - that can help you beat Murphy's Law.

Before reading on, think about a project your school or centre is about to embark on. Perhaps you'll find some useful guidance that can help you avoid common traps.

When Do Bad Things Happen?

Successful project managers have learned that unexpected events that derail progress can happen at any time. Some are external events like COVID. Others are mistakes made by those involved in the work. Projects have a life cycle, and it turns out to be important when in the project life cycle the event happens.

If something unexpected happens while you are in the planning stage, making an adjustment, or even scrapping the project, will not be too costly. Once the project is underway there is much more to lose. Similarly, mistakes made during practice sessions aren't as big a problem as those made when performance really matters. So, the time when projects are being implemented, when the stakes are high, is like a window of time when you are most vulnerable to Murphy's Law.

What is the implication? You want the implementation window to be open for as short a period as possible. So, it makes sense to work slowly - thinking carefully about all possibilities - during the planning phase of change. Then act fast when it comes to implementation. Have people spend more time in practice, so that when things have to be done right there is less time needed for learning.

This may seem obvious but it is an approach that runs counter to some natural human tendencies. When we have something important to do, we can feel driven to get things started. We can quickly decide we've thought of everything when really we've only thought about the things that are obvious to us! Taking extra time for consultation, consideration of possible scenarios, and practice, may seem like an unnecessary expense, but it usually works out to be far less costly than abandoning a half-completed project.

Closing the Window

The best way to beat Murphy's Law, then, is to get the implementation window of projects closed as quickly as possible. Projects don't get derailed by unexpected events that happen once the project is completed. Flyvbjerg has important tips for getting the window closed.

Albert Einstein famously said that "perfection of means and confusion of ends seem to characterise our age". In other words, people often focus on what they do and how they do it, while not thinking clearly about why. A question we need to consider with any change is, 'What is this work going to accomplish, and why is this important?'

Knowing what we are aiming to achieve and why helps leaders to focus, rather than get sidetracked by unnecessary activity. It provides leaders with a basis for saying 'No', which turns out to be a critical skill needed by anyone who wants to get windows closed quickly.

Amazon have recognised the need to remove the 'confusion of ends' from their projects. Anyone in the company who is promoting a new project must present their proposal in the form of a future Press Release explaining to key stakeholders what was achieved and why this was important for the company. The Press Release format not only stirs the imagination; it creates a disciplined approach to planning, where people start by thinking about the end to be achieved, then work their way back to decide what steps needs to be taken first.

And a further tip from Flyvbjerg is to value learning and expertise. Projects that are completed on time and on budget are almost always organised by people who have done similar projects before. Enthusiasm is not an effective substitute for prior learning. One of the reasons why cities that host the Olympic Games always experience huge cost blow-outs and struggle to get venues ready on time is that the people managing the project only do it once. The Olympics then head to a new city where a new project team starts the learning process over again.

What are the lessons? Help your people build experience and use those with expertise to take the lead. If you are experienced, don't assume that others will have the same intuition about what works and what does not. And have people work on the same kinds of projects regularly: the more experience they get the more they will learn.

Murphy's Law can always cause frustration and wasted effort. Understanding the nature of projects, the need for clarity of purpose, and the value of learning can help you close the window in which Murphy might operate.

Building Projects with Lego

By Phil Ramsey

One of Flyvbjerg's project leadership heuristics is to 'build with Lego.' This is shorthand for a concept that is transforming projects in many fields: the modularity approach. What does modularity mean?

Imagine building a house where every component is different. You would need to be skilled with all sorts of tools. Extra time would be needed at every phase of the build, to think about how you'll need to adjust the way you work. And if any component fails or gets broken it will take some time to replace. Contrast that to building with Lego. Once you get used to how the pieces go together you are working with small things that are all the same. Even though they are small they can be combined to make things that are massive. Each Lego block is a 'module'. Put a bunch of small modules together and you are making progress on your project.

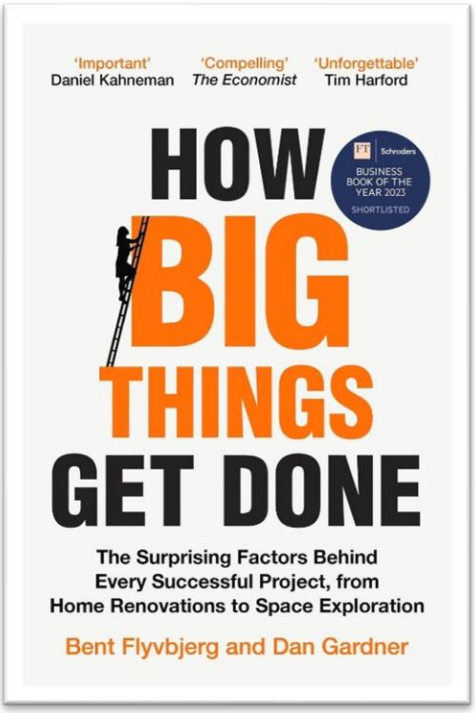
When you work using small modules you are continuously working with something you know. That means there is lots of opportunity to learn and transfer your learning to the next step of the project. A classic example of modularity is how cargo is loaded onto ships. Up until the 1950s loading a ship was one big project and every project was different. Stevedores had to work out the best way to do the work based on the design of the particular ship and the nature of the cargo. Loading ships was slow and dangerous. Then the container was invented. Each container was a module. Stevedores could quickly learn how to safely fill a container. From that point each container was easily handled, transported, loaded and unloaded. Modularising cargo transformed shipping and global trade.

If you are involved in change within a school or centre, think how you might incorporate modularity. What would be your version of Lego? Perhaps it might be a new way to conduct a lesson, an approach that, once learned, can be used with a variety of subjects. Modularity allows new approaches to be rolled out lesson by lesson, then teacher by teacher, classroom by classroom.

Of course, the approach taken to modularity in building or shipping will be different to what works in education. Teachers need opportunity to be creative and authentic. Modularity may need to allow for personalisation. Still, learning is at the heart of the approach, so building with Lego can be creative and fun, contributing to the culture of your school or centre.

BOOK REVIEW:
How Big Things Get Done

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – November 2025

This book summarises the lessons learned by Bent Flyvbjerg, the world's leading expert on "megaprojects" - projects costing over $1 billion. Flyvbjerg, a professor at Oxford and the University of Copenhagen, has teamed up with journalist and author Dan Gardner to create a book that is full of valuable concepts and is engaging to read.

What makes the book fascinating is that it draws on examples of both success and failure, all of which are explained with clarity. Often the contrasts used are enlightening. For example, two of the great buildings of the world are the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Both are spectacular, but while the Guggenheim was completed on time and under budget, the Sydney Opera House was scheduled to be built in 5 years but took 14 and had one of the highest cost overruns in history. The story of what went wrong in Sydney and worked so well in Bilbao reinforces the important lessons of the book, particularly the value of planning and learning.

One of the fascinating parts of the book is the appendix where Flyvbjerg outlines eleven heuristics for project leadership. A heuristic is a 'rule of thumb' for simplifying complex decisions; one that captures knowledge an expert has built up over a lifetime of experience. The eleven heuristics reinforce key ideas contained in the body of the book in a way that sticks in the memory.

The articles in this newsletter have briefly explained some of the lessons from How Big Things Get Done. Read the book and you'll find there are more. While many of the projects described involve engineering - buildings, tunnels, power stations, etc - with some thought Flyvbjerg's heuristics can be applied to projects within your school or centre, possibly saving you time and waste, and reducing frustration. How Big Things Get Done is well worth reading!