Peter Simon

Lucidus Consulting

Still Looking on the Bright Side of Life

In 2005 Steve Jobs (former CEO of Apple) said during a speech at Stanford University 'there is opportunity in every adversity'. We found this statement while carrying out some research on project risk management for PMI® in 2013. What attracted us to it was the word opportunity. In our 38th Lucid Thought we talked about upside risks, or opportunities as defined in the PMBOK© Chapter 11, APM's PRAM Guide and M_o_R, and how 'they' are things that might happen by chance, that if they did, would have a beneficial outcome on one or more of our (project) objectives. We emphasised the word chance as opposed to a choice.

Today whenever we consult, teach or discuss risk management with anyone who will listen to us, we talk about risk events being; upside or downside, positive or negative, beneficial or detrimental, good or bad, or opportunities or threats. While most people 'get it' we find that actually identifying upside risks is often very difficult. Whether this is because 'we' are anchored to a 'risk is bad' frame, there are few(er) upside risks or we don't know how to identify them is another, far bigger topic. However, what we do find is that discussing and making good things happen out of bad situations is something that comes easier and often feels more relevant.

Turning adversity into opportunity would appear to us to be something that we can do quite naturally. Rather than becoming depressed or morbid because something bad has happened, given the right stimulus or frame of mind, we can often make things better; either by choice or identifying and influencing resultant upside risks. This is what Steve Jobs was talking about and what perhaps should become more of our focus when discussing upside risks and upside risk management.

Closely aligned to this way of thinking is the subject of Emergent Change, which is a fundamental component of programme management, but not necessarily of project management. In programmes we are told that we should expect change and be prepared to 'deal with it' whereas in projects change is often resisted (sometimes explicitly through a 'no change' philosophy). Reacting to adverse events in a positive way will almost certainly lead to making changes to a project's scope. While this may be frowned upon by some, we believe it can have a net beneficial effect on a project and in more ways than one. Not only by potentially overcoming the negative impact of the adverse event but also the boost to morale gained by doing so. This sense of achievement (overcoming adversity) can help towards improving or maintaining a project team's performance, and we know the benefit of doing that.

'Always looking on the bright side of life' may seem a trivial and overused statement (or song title) but it can be the make or break of a project (or any other endeavour). We are not talking about being over optimistic, or deluding ourselves that things will always get better, but challenging ourselves to look for opportunities (choices and upside risks) that result from the bad situations we either find or might find ourselves in. If we do this then we believe that our chances of success will be significantly improved.

Over the past few months Lucidus Consulting has encountered a number of emergent changes. Initially these changes could be seen as unforeseen adverse events (they were actually risk events that were never documented or openly discussed and hence unplanned for). So, applying the principles of this Lucid Thought, our challenge is to now to make the right choices and to identifying the upside risks that we can influence in order to allow the company to continue to prosper into the future.

© Lucidus Consulting Ltd 2005-2014