



FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF *Dr. Alexander Laufer*

## Management as Improvisation

*Things are supposed to work a certain way—  
and then there's what really happens*

DESPITE THE BEST PLANNING, GAPS EMERGE BETWEEN THE model and the reality of most projects. Often, when unexpected problems arise during project implementation, quick thinking and a pragmatic approach are the tools managers need to bridge the gap.

I was reminded of this when I spoke with a project manager in charge of modernizing old buildings for the Federal Government. Though he had straightforward goals (removing asbestos, updating wiring, etc.), achieving these goals proved anything but straightforward. The real challenge, the manager discovered, was completing his work without disturbing the tenants still occupying a building.

**QUIET ZONE** At one of his sites, a Federal courthouse, workers had continually violated noise restrictions imposed during the hours that court was in session. Typically, when noise complaints came in, someone from the project office found the source of the problem and reminded workers of the restrictions. When confronted, workers explained that they either hadn't known about the restrictions or had forgotten them.

The solution? Directly addressing those who could control the noise—the workers—and making it clear that they would be held responsible for their actions. The project manager posted the noise restrictions at every construction entrance—along with a warning that violation of noise controls could “result in immediate and permanent removal from the job site.” A simple sign was all it took to address a significant threat to project success.

**LIVE WIRES** On another project, demolition work on one floor of a building disrupted the telecommunication service to occupied offices. It turned out that years of office space reconfigurations had resulted in tangled

wiring that wound its way between floors and through offices. For example, stripping a telephone closet on the 12th floor cut service to offices on the 14th floor.

The obvious solution was to hire a technician to systematically trace all the wires and eliminate the problem upfront—but the project couldn't afford this. Instead, the manager found a retired technician willing to work “on call” to identify live communication lines before renovation began in an area, using a listening device. This low-cost solution provided a satisfactory solution.

**A NOSE FOR TROUBLE** When the roof of a fully occupied office building needed to be re-tarred, occupants complained that the noxious fumes were reaching their offices. The project manager learned that fresh-air intakes on the roof were sucking in the fumes whenever the wind blew in their direction. The air intakes couldn't be turned off completely, if the building was to remain occupied.

The building manager threatened to evacuate all 5,000 occupants, which would bring the project to a standstill. When experts couldn't come up with a technical solution, the project manager came up with an innovative fix: He invented a new occupation. He hired a “sniffer” to sit beside the intakes and sniff the air for tar fumes. When the wind blew fumes towards the intakes, the sniffer turned them off temporarily—never for more than a couple hours, and well within acceptable limits.

**KEEP IT SIMPLE** As this manager learned, the unknowns of project work often require immediate response. Thankfully, high-performance results don't necessarily require high-tech solutions. Quick, simple, and inexpensive fixes are sometimes the answer to keeping a project on schedule and within budget. •