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## What if things go wrong?

### Some basics

Every project is different. There is no way of predicting the range of things that can go wrong. And things can go wrong at any stage of a project.

Risk can be minimised by implementing risk mitigation measures such as those outlined in each of the chapters above.

However, it is important to realise that some of the protective measures that are available can, and should, be used:

- Graduated rewards and penalties can be used to advantage where there are early indications of problems developing.
- In some cases, it may be worth approaching a consultant's superiors if performance is below standard.
- In extreme cases, a project can be terminated. Despite the cost, it may be better to simply start again. But seek legal advice first.

Things can go wrong at any stage of a project. Any of the following may (or may not) presage a problem:

- An **exclusive approach** by the consultant, often characterised by the 'just leave it all to us, we'll fix it' attitude. It is often accompanied by an attitude that public servants don't really know what they

are doing. One symptom noted by an entity that experienced this attitude was persistent late arrival for meetings, a problem that was remedied by protesting to the firm's hierarchy.

- The corollary is a dismissive attitude by government entities whose staff treat **consultants with contempt**. Treat consultants as you would your own staff. Good people management practice ultimately generates better results.
- **A breakdown in communication**. Good consultants make a point of regularly (at least once a week, but on a daily basis for some projects) checking with the client that everything is proceeding satisfactorily. Not touching base may be a sign that things are not going too well. Take the initiative to re-establish contact yourself, and find out how things are going.
- The corollary from the consultant's perspective is when the client begins to '**walk away**' from the job. When clients plead too much work to be able to take a direct interest, or suggest that the consultant 'just get on with it yourself', or find some other means of distancing themselves from the project, consultants begin to worry about being able to achieve a successful outcome.
- Excessive '**library research**'. Too much general research may indicate that the consultant does not have sufficient expertise in the area.
- Excessive focus on **producing a report**, rather than dealing with issues or people. This is particularly relevant in choosing consultants to implement programs that involve organisational change. Unless there is a shortage of reports on your bookshelf, look for a consultant who is geared to solving problems rather than just documenting them.
- Use of '**guru language**'. If a consultant suggests 'leveraging off the knowledge base to achieve optimal organisational alignment in a contextual framework going forward', find one who uses plain English.
- Undue focus on the use of software or an analytical package as the primary means of analysing issues or solving problems. An analytical framework is essential in problem-solving, but beware the '**package bender**' who only knows one technique and tries to adapt it to every situation. A good check during the selection process is to ask what alternative approaches could be used.

- A too-ready willingness to drop the **bid price** during negotiations may indicate that a consultant has difficulty in finding other work at the bid price. Good, sought-after consulting firms will often refuse to materially alter their bid price without also redefining the scope of the project.
- **Staff nominated by the client** to work alongside the consultant find it difficult to contribute, because of insufficient skills or because of other work priorities. Unless alternative resources are made available to the consultant, delay (or higher cost) is likely.
- The client, or a steering committee, focuses on **red herrings**, avoids or postpones taking decisions, or **vacillates** in providing 'sign-off' as the stages of a project are completed.
- **Persistent delays** or regular attempts to redefine the scope of the work. On the other hand, occasional delays, or necessary redefinition of issues may be an indication of a high-quality consultant.
- Once a client or a consultant has started to **refer to the provisions of the contract**, the relationship is probably in serious trouble.

Prevention of problems is invariably preferable to any cures. So it is important to be aware of major warning signals. Because this publication is written from an Australian Public Service perspective, most of the issues raised here could be misinterpreted as implying that the consultant is invariably responsible for any problems. However, consultants may also come to feel aggrieved during the course of a contract. As the use of consultants increases, and the CPRs become more directive, the likelihood of legal action against the Australian Government is also likely to rise.

Seeking some degree of legal advice at all stages of a procurement is a worthwhile risk-reduction strategy. Advice should definitely be sought quickly if things do start to go wrong. Management decisions on what to do next are always better if they are fully informed about the options available.

This text is taken from *Managing Consultants: A practical guide for busy public sector managers*, by Leo Dobes, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.