

THE PROJECT FEAR MENU

How fear can paralyze or motivate you



BY LESLEY T. CUSICK

Fear is defined as an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat. Often found at the top of the list of common fears are the sounds of swarming bees, public speaking and the even more basic fear of failure. After all, there is so much to lose, isn't there?

The more we think about our fears, the more anxious we can become; it can be paralyzing. But on the other hand, fear can also be motivating. So how can we use that inevitable fear for positivity? Motivation is called for to face the fears that affect our projects and how we interact with the communities impacted by those projects.

A Slice of Panic

Try to imagine fear as a dinner menu. The fear menu has numerous appetizers and entrees, but no desserts. Fear appetizers are when we see others who took a risk and got burned or outright failed. Because of this, we decide *never* to let that happen to us; we disengage and retreat to our comfortable corners. We also fail to grow (other than to grow more fearful). Fear entrées are the full-plate emotions of failing, such as panic, anxiety, shame, dismay and apprehension. Finally, the side dishes are the things that affect us going forward, including unease, trepidation, timidity, doubt and dread.

We lose confidence. We don't trust others. We don't trust ourselves. The effects of that experience may go well beyond our work life. How we manage that fear menu determines if our projects will be positively or negatively affected.

Traditional Fears

Fear of change/fear of the unknown:

Several years ago, a client was introduced to a way of doing a review in a legal and proven-to-be-successful way, but that method had never been done by the client's organization. Their fear antennae sprang into action and the client faced fear of criticism, fear of failure and fear of being able to defend the change to others—both internally to the organization and to the public. What was the result of persisting and implementing the change? Success! What was the remedy? Continuous, systematic and consistent encouragement with many levels of personnel. The outcome accrued numerous benefits such as project cost and time savings, relationship-building with parties presumed to have been foes, greater defensibility, as well as new-found confidence in the individuals who participated and persisted. If they hadn't stepped out of their comfort zone, they never would have experienced the success or gained the confidence they ultimately did. It's important to note that the fear of change when under schedule pressure is an important consideration. While people can see the value in the new approach,

they don't want it to be *their* project that brings about the change. However, putting off the change can put off the success, cost savings and reputation-building.

Fear of failure:

This fear can be paralyzing to the point where we don't start things that we're afraid can't reach the outcome we need. We don't want the embarrassment or the career consequences. We certainly don't want to do it alone and be isolated in our shortcomings. One method to handle being afraid of failure is to *realistically* define and then manage your expectations. Build your project from the bottom up. Define interim milestones that are manageable and identify the tasks that you understand, as well as the tasks where you will need help. Don't be ashamed to ask for help and don't wait too late to say something. Additionally, it is important to recognize the difference between fear of failure and fear of the unknown. If we haven't done something before, there is an aspect of the unknown to be overcome. An excellent approach to managing that fear is through a mentor-protégé relationship. IRWA has hundreds of professionals to reach out to and dozens of courses where you can learn, ask questions in a fear-free environment and build professional relationships for the future. That is a definite win-win!

Fear of trying something new, having it be successful and then being blamed for not trying the new thing sooner:

This is a non-traditional fear, but it is definitely one that we may experience, especially if we are innovators. This fear encompasses several others – trying something new, being criticized and failing. The difference is that this one has a positive result and creates opportunities for you. After all, you or your team took the risk, created the innovation, solved the interim challenges, made it work and saw it through. Now you're in the position of having first-hand knowledge of the lessons learned and can teach them to others. This is one fear that you need to turn around. Instead of a fear, embrace the situation as an opportunity to make a difference.

Fears Associated with Communication

Fear of engaging with the public:

There aren't news stories about all the public meetings that are positive and productive. Instead, we see images of angry confrontations, accusations and protests. Have you ever wondered how many of those unpleasant encounters are taking place because

the public hasn't been involved until *after* decisions have been made? The public needs to be involved in projects when there is opportunity for them to have meaningful participation, and this needs to happen when they can still contribute to changes in routes, permits and siting *before* decisions are made. Who better to engage the public than the project professionals most familiar with it? If you are not comfortable about handling that engagement yourself, then hire a professional to assist you. Don't misunderstand – you are not handing off your responsibility. Instead, you are bringing in a partner to *help* you.

Fear of losing control:

Project management may be afraid of stepping into a community engagement effort due to the fear of being pulled in and not being able to get out, as well as losing control of cost and schedule. It can be seen as a no-win scenario. As professionals, *we know* there are positive examples of engagement and we also know that successes rarely make the news. A way to work through the fear of losing control is by building a team of people you can trust. Make sure these are individuals you can communicate with (listen to) and from whom you can take constructive criticism and not feel threatened. A communications professional should be on your team to help you. People who work well with the public have different skillsets. They will be able to help you in two major ways: by listening to your wants and needs, as well as listening to the community. What is the key word in both? Listening.

Fear of public criticism:

There is clearly vulnerability when we put ourselves in front of people, especially when the projects we are supporting are controversial, unpopular and/or misunderstood. A remedy for dealing with criticism is to work with friends or colleagues with whom you can test your messaging. They can observe your reactions to help you learn to maintain your composure when challenged. There is susceptibility in

this exercise, but better to take criticism from this group and prepare than to have a public meltdown. We shouldn't take the criticism personally, nor can we objectify our critics. There is a level of steeling that we need to do for ourselves, especially when dealing with controversial projects where there is media attention. We need to recognize the anger that we may observe among the public is most often driven by *their* fear. Consider the high probability that only limited or no community engagement may have occurred. How would you react if you found out at the last minute about something that was going to affect you? Putting the shoe on the other foot is good practice for life.

Fear of not having all of the answers:

This one looms large and may be the most significant fear of all. As analysts and planners, we're always supposed to have looked at all of the alternatives to an action and to have all of the answers. That works with science and engineering, but it doesn't work with people. For instance, if we fill a wetland, we will cause adverse effects to flora, fauna, groundwater recharge, flood storage capacity, etc. If there are steep slopes, there will be cutting and filling to create a suitable grade and discourage runoff. But if we ask someone *why* they are opposed to or concerned about a project, we can't know the answer or presume to know the answer. We need to ask them to tell us and listen to their point of view. Only then can we begin to evaluate changes or alternatives.

Fear of being accused of working with opponents:

If we want to find out what someone else is thinking, at some point we need to interact with them. The public includes opponents *and* supporters, and sometimes we can forget that. Reading something written by project opponents, asking others about them, or observing them from a distance can all be useful preparatory steps, but until you actually engage with opponents who have concerns and issues (i.e., *before* your project becomes an agenda item for organized opposition), you won't be able to understand their point of view. The interpersonal contact provides context. To someone on your team who didn't know what you were trying to do by talking with citizens, it might look like you're taking the opponent's side. There is an easy remedy for that. People simply need to know what you do, how you do it and how it provides value. You're not a traitor or a disingenuous person; you're doing your job.

Reap the Benefits

As to the benefits of public engagement, it demonstrates commitment to the project and to the community; it's very powerful. It shows that the concerns of the public matter to you, that community insights are worth the time to learn about, that you recognize you ultimately need the public in order to be successful and most importantly, that you understand your project hasn't been fully informed until you have sought out and listened to the voices of the community. For some, engaging with the community can bring about feelings of vulnerability—the opposite of power. However, consider that the aim of your project isn't power—it's success.

Additionally, you will learn from your shortcomings and you may build relationships with people who are still stuck and see you as an example. You may even gain support—or at least a lack of opposition—from parties you never expected to support your efforts.

It's time to stop allowing your fears to paralyze you. Ultimately, facing that fear menu and allowing your fears to motivate you will benefit your work habits, your project success and even the communities impacted by those projects. ☺



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