Communication – Air Travel and Project Management

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I am not a pilot, nor do I play one on tv. However, I have a number of friends that are and I have had the joys(?) of travelling quite a bit by plane in the last few years. I have also flown on charter flights and that is a different experience than flying commercial as well. When I flew charter, the pilot allowed us to listen to the communication between the various control centers and he took some time to explain what the handoffs were about. And, like every industry there are numerous acronyms and terms with their own in-house meanings.

Recently, I was on a commercial flight into Chicago. Everything was normal and uneventful. And then, just before landing, a few hundred feet or less, we accelerated and took off again. We never touched the ground but we sure came close. After a few minutes, the pilot came on and said we had "been brought in too high" and that we would try again and be "on the ground in five minutes". Whether or not I believe that as the real reason is for another day. However, it definitely took more than five minutes to get back to landing – and **EVERYBODY** who has ever flown before **KNEW THAT IT WOULD**!

On the next flight, when we left the airport, on United, the pilot told us that if we listened to a certain station on the airplane provided music and talk channels we could hear the pilot and air traffic controller discussions live and unedited. I listened to this and while I didn't understand all the terms it was interesting and added to my learning about how the communication works.

As I often do, I tied these experiences back to Project Management. I had two great examples of Project Management in in the space of two hours and a third example from previous experiences. First, the aborted landing – I was in the plane, had no idea why we aborted the landing, didn't necessarily believe the reasoning given and absolutely never believed we would be "on the ground in five minutes" (which proved true about 20 minutes later). My trust in the pilot never wavered and I like to believe that it was the pilot's wisdom about issues on the ground that kept us from landing (but, for all I know, the pilot didn't put the landing gear down and that tour was screaming at us to not land). So, the communication from the pilot after we accelerated was lacking and seemed both polished and standardized to make all sound fine.

The second example is the ability to listen to the flight communications. I still have no control over outcomes or methods and don't even know all of the terms being used BUT I had more of a feeling of "empowerment" and that just listening helped me better understand what was happening. The third example is the first one I mentioned above – when I flew charter and the pilot not only allowed me to listen but explained what I was hearing and what it meant.

We hear again and again and again and again that the mantra of successful Project Management is **COMMUNICATION**! And, these examples reminded me of this again as well. The terms and acronyms

that we use in Project Management have meaning to those of us that use them. But, our team members may have no idea what we are talking about. Also, they may not have had exposure to a Project Manager and "project-management-ese" language before. And, if we have meetings (with or without the team) where we don't explain the results and at least some of the reasoning to the entire team then we lose their trust. If we don't communicate the realistic situation then we also lose their trust – those of us who have had to circle in an airplane know that nothing happens in a mere five minutes! This is just like telling team members or stakeholders that "we are over budget and late on the schedule, but we will catch up in time without any problems". Anybody who has been on a project before has every reason to doubt this statement.

I know that not everybody always knows (or should) everything about a project but the more open we are and the more realistic we are in our communication the more the team and stakeholders will trust us and that only helps our projects!