HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Deviant project behaviours and their impact

The Normalisation of Deviant behaviours is costing projects, programmes and organisations too much. Jeff Pinto explores why it happens and how we stop it.

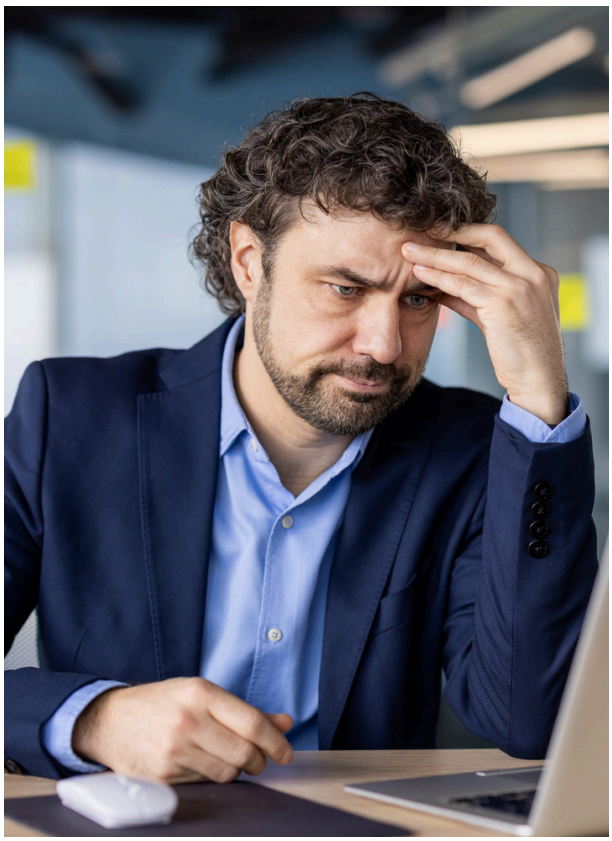
In 2020 and again, in 2023, I served as an expert witness in two lawsuits where a large utility in North America (the specific details are confidential) tacitly sanctioned the use of unsafe work methods to 'get the projects done as quickly as possible'. Normally, the reckless nature of the work being done by the employees of this utility would have been shrugged off as "SOP" (Standard Operating Procedure), despite workers cutting corners, ignoring safety guidelines, and flouting management instructions.

In these cases, however, the SOP resulted in the deaths of two sub-contractor employees, who were following procedures used to speed up completion of the work, including operating in an electrified field ('it takes too long to cut the power') and employing the wrong equipment to get the work done fast ('it's always been done this way and works fine').

Same company, two deaths. Surely, after this, they've learned their lesson and made the necessary corrections? Well, I'm scheduled to testify in three more cases *with the same contractor*, so you're free to draw your own conclusions.

This was a highly personal example, but the press is filled with other stories of wilful misbehaviour that often leads to tragic consequences. Many of us remember January 13, 2012, when the Carnival cruise ship *Costa Concordia* crashed into rocks off Giglio Island, along the Italian coast, leading to the deaths of 32 passengers on board. The sinking was attributed to gross negligence on the part of the captain and crew. Prosecutors found that the ship was

cruising too close to the island in a 'ship salute' publicity stunt before it rammed into the submerged rocks. Later reports suggested this wasn't simply the action of one reckless individual; in fact, Carnival's directors saw these risky ship salutes as a convenient marketing tool. In other words, this behaviour was the norm, with each captain encouraged to stray from the approved, safe path.



These two examples illustrate a phenomenon that goes by the name Normalisation of Deviance (NoD). The term was coined to describe the culture at NASA in the investigation following the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster of 1987, where a culture of risk-taking, poor communication, and bad decision-making led to unsafe practices and an organisational environment that encouraged these behaviours.

NoD is best understood as the state where people within the organisation become so accustomed to inappropriate or deviant behaviours that they no longer see them as deviant; even when these attitudes are stretching the limits of acceptable ethical or safety behaviour. So, the question must be asked: how does this relate to project management or our own organisation's project development practices?

The simple answer is that it represents behaviours that can lead to a number of significant problems with project development and delivery. Cultural failures and flawed checks permit and normalise these patterns of destructive actions by key stakeholders, even when they are counterproductive to the projects and fly in the face of organisational expectations.

Why does NoD happen?

The first point to understand is that **NoD behaviours happen everywhere;** examples are common across industries and occupations. From medical practice and healthcare to construction and workplace safety, to auditing and finance, the list of settings in which NoD behaviours are found is long. It's also a phenomenon that cuts across corporate hierarchies, disciplines, and training/background.

Second, **NoD happens as a result of a variety of failures**:

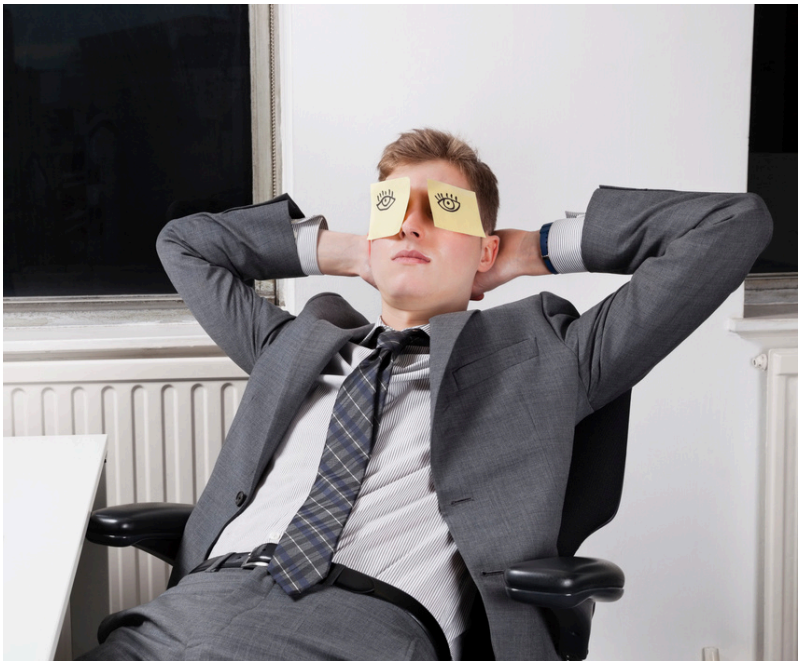
- failures within the governance and control systems of organisations ('no one is paying attention'),
- reinforced by counter-productive or perverse reward systems ('bonuses only go to the project managers who get their projects done on time, no questions asked'), and
- cultures that stifle dissenting views ('if you want to move up, keep your opinions to yourself!').

We know that the unique nature of project work is characterised by significant pressures in developing products or services while addressing a cacophony of often-competing stakeholder groups, and safety, budgetary, schedule and quality expectations, all while working with temporarily assembled teams. Because of the constant pressures for demonstrated performance, these teams may not have the familiarity and comfort level to develop a supportive, positive culture. So instead feel the pressures from outside groups and challenges to get the work done, 'any way necessary'.

There are two dynamics operating here: the problems with **cultural** pressures and the impact of **gradualism**. Organisational culture refers to the unwritten rules of the game, or the pattern of basic behaviours and standards that groups develop to deal with challenges in their environment. We teach them to new members of the team or the organisation to instil a sense of who we are and what we stand for.

Cultures are hugely important because they signal:

- how we should act (expected behaviour),
- how we communicate with each other, and
- how we respond collectively to threats or opportunities.



In this sense, culture creates enormous pressure to conform and get along or face social or professional ostracism. Culture is a powerful, informal means for enforcing behaviour.

Gradualism is one of the most insidious features of NoD behaviours because it starts slowly. No one is likely to approach you on your first day and suggest that you cheat on your expense form or contribute to the design of a new building with major safety flaws embedded. Deviant behaviours appear over time as a series of steps, which may not seem different to earlier approaches, but collectively result in significant changes in basic behaviour or expected actions.

Unacceptable behaviours often evolve through a series of decisions, whether made or avoided, with no visible negative effects. The potential for catastrophe is never envisioned as an option until it occurs. The *Costa Concordia* had gotten away with their risky ship salutes dozens of times in the past, until they didn't. The utility company had gotten so used to stringing 'hot lines' in order to save time that they never envisioned serious consequences, until they happened. In this way, the unexpected becomes the expected, which becomes the accepted.

How will the pressures come for you and what to look out for?

In training classes, I'm often asked where challenges come from. Where are the pressures going to arise? In a nutshell, you'll find yourself exposed to NoD in three ways:

1. Institutionalisation

Newcomers to the organisation are first exposed to deviant behaviours by witnessing them on the part of authority figures (the boss or project leader), who explain that these behaviours are expected. Hearing your boss tell you that 'everybody does it' or 'this is how we get things done around here' are powerful sources of pressure to conform.

2. Socialisation

Think about people in your organisation who were publicly rewarded or held up as a standard of behaviour. What were the circumstances around those public accolades? Was it for enforcing a safety guideline or following standards of best practice, or was it for getting the project in on time and on budget, with no questions asked? As we all know, you get what you reinforce.

Likewise, *critical incidents* like these are the best teacher for new members of the project team. They tell team members what it really takes to get ahead (regardless of the 'company line' we hear from managers). When team members point to a team member who repeatedly lied to customers to book a sale or overloaded construction crane tonnage to speed assembly – and was rewarded for it – you have just observed examples of the sort of critical incidents that tell everyone what it *really* takes to get ahead, ethics be damned. Newcomers are pressured to join in with the group by publicly rewarding expected behaviours, and believe me, people learn fast, for good and for ill.

3. Rationalisation

We rationalise our behaviours all the time. With NoD, it's no different; there is always a plausible excuse for it. We tell ourselves that these deviant behaviours aren't only necessary, but acceptable and perhaps even legitimate. The gradualism in NoD is most often demonstrated as part of the rationalisation step. Repeated missteps or deviations from accepted operating norms and principles are ignored to the point where they become rationalised and accepted – even expected – on the part of project team members.

Where do we see NoD in projects?

I have done extensive research on the NoD phenomenon in project settings and the work has pointed to a set of behaviours, or project activities, where we most often experience the consequences of a sick culture, and the promotion of NoD behaviours. As we walk through these situations, I would ask you to personalise the settings; put yourself and your organisation in the frame and consider: one, is this a failing we share? And two, how do we see specific examples of this behaviour occurring?

1. Project proposals and lying to partners

Sadly, it's not uncommon to deliberately use misleading or false information when dealing with key project stakeholders (customers or contractors). When we lie to win competitive bids, falsify pertinent information, downplay risks, or make unrealistic project delivery promises as part of scope negotiations, we are operating in destructive ways that are usually defended in the weakest possible manner ('everyone does it or they won't win the bids').

Knowing full well that quite often, these initial promises are based on clear falsehoods, project organisations tacitly (and sometimes overtly) encourage these behaviours. As a recent example, an investigation of wide-spread corrupt practices in the Canadian construction industry in 2011 identified bid-rigging and price fixing in the awarding and management of public contracts. The commission announced that the corruption and collusion were both widespread and considered the 'usual' way of managing public contracts.

2. Client/contractor relationships

A fascinating feature of many client/contractor relationships is the strange dance we often witness between them. Each is looking for advantages, refusing to trust the other party, and generally avoiding partnerships and open communication in favour of hoarding information or even, deliberate deception.

One example: not many years ago, a major industrial construction firm won a bid to build a wastewater treatment plant for a large city in the northern hemisphere. They submitted a bid with schematics that included a number of deliberately underestimated capacity requirements, which the city's own engineers missed prior to contract award. From that day until the end of the project there were change order requests, fighting, threats of lawsuits and distrust.

After the fact, the project manager bragged that his firm made more money off the change orders than from the original project contract! Somewhere along the line, contractors and their clients morphed into implacable enemies, rather than partners with a vested interest in cooperating.

3. Planning and scheduling dynamics

By scheduling dynamics, I mean the problems that often occur during the project planning and scheduling cycle, especially between the project manager and their own top management. To create accurate schedules, it's vital for project managers to have full information and a constructive, trusting relationships with senior managers.

When a project manager is asked to develop a schedule, there should be the implicit assumption that estimates will be in good faith and the resulting project plan reflects a reasonable path to completion. Imagine the reaction when the project manager has heard from their boss (for the fourth or fifth time), 'it's too long. Shorten it'.

Eventually, the project manager will submit a pseudo-schedule that's no longer reality, even if it meets the approval of top management. Try convincing your project team to get motivated to pursue this plan! As one project manager told me about his relationship with his boss: "If he won't take my estimates seriously, I'm going to stop giving him serious estimates."

4. Workplace safety

I've mentioned several examples already of the dangers of NoD as it pertains to workplace safety. Some of the most egregious and easy-to-fall-into dangers of NoD come from cutting corners or failing to enforce safety standards. Although everyone is aware of unsafe practices and fully recognises that such behaviours should be avoided, there is often an unspoken subtext accompanying these rules where it's not only possible but often expected that safety rules can be relaxed or ignored just this once 'for the good of the project'

So, what's to be done?

After talking about NoD with corporate audiences (and many times, thoroughly depressing them), I can anticipate the next question: What's the good news?

Well, first, let's finish addressing the bad news – getting to this point took time (remember the concept of gradualism that we discussed) and getting out of it requires time too.

It's more than the belief in a quick fix. Corporate cultures are embedded, they are strong and they are resilient. A culture that enforces NoD behaviours isn't one that quickly pivots to positive approaches.

The good news is that NoD practices are easily identified, once members of the organisation or project team are clued in on what to look for. *These behaviours are not hidden*; in fact, they are widely understood and followed, even if it's sometimes to the chagrin of members of the project team. Identifying the behaviour, then, is not the challenge; the challenge comes from taking the next, necessary steps to address and begin shifting processes into standards of appropriate professionalism and away from NoD.

Let's consider some effective steps we can take. Remember though, these are a starter kit; they're a way to start focusing positively, but the hard work remains, getting us from where we are currently acting to where we hope to operate.

5 steps to changing NoD practices

1. Establish standards for acceptable behaviour

The first step in the process of addressing NoD is to recognise that ambiguity is not your friend. The more flexibility (or murkiness) in how behaviour is controlled and rewarded, the greater the likelihood that teams will interpret 'lack of controls' as a willingness to 'ignore controls'. Remember that *the standard is the standard*, regardless of who it's applied to. If we have one set of expectations for top management and another for project team members, we already have the necessary ingredients for cynicism.

2. Take a hard, honest look at current practices

Remember that NoD behaviours are widely engaged in; with a little prodding by key organisational members, it'll be easy to come up with current behaviours, both the positive and potentially destructive. It's also useful to consider using leaders outside of the work group to break loose the logjams of established thought processes.

Groupthink got us into this mess and the last thing we need is to jointly reassure each other that these behaviours are really okay. Bringing in some outside perspective is often necessary to change the attitudes and perspective of those caught in these self-defeating cycles.

3. Link these behaviours to outcomes

Project team members have to see the link between their deviant practices and real negative outcomes for themselves, their project, and their organisation. As long as their behaviours aren't seen as really all that bad or leading to negative outcomes, you'll have a tough time making the case that new standards are needed to replace the old ones.

On the other hand, if you can show clear cause and effect ('we allowed the site workers to ignore safety harness requirements and that led to a scaffolding accident'), it's easier for project team members to buy in to the need to alter current attitudes and behaviours.

4. Reinforce through modified reward systems

Remember, NoD practices became embedded in the culture in the first place because they are, in some manner, rewarded. When we promote or offer bonuses for rapid project completion, are we sending the unintended signal that all we care about are results, rather than results *and* process? One of the oldest laws of human behaviour is that we tend to get the behaviours that we are reinforcing, either intentionally or unintentionally.

A critical step is to restructure reward systems so that teams can see past simple task completion (and the unspoken consequence, 'at any cost') to a clearer idea of not just *what* to do but *how* to get it accomplished.

5. Be public and loudly present

I suggested at the beginning of this article that NoD occurs as the result of a failure of organisational culture and control/governance systems. The challenge with changing a culture is that these are, by definition, the unwritten rules of the game. New slogans or posters on the wall of an employee break room won't bring the changes you're looking for.

On the other hand, the public and clear linking of rewards and/or sanctions for specific behaviour, along with a message that new attitudes are required and compliance is mandatory, makes it clear in peoples' minds that this isn't some temporary quick-fix or PR stunt.

At the risk of seeming hard-hearted or controversial, it may be necessary to provide some form of 'public execution' of team members for repeated violations of the new standards. We all prefer to reward good behaviour, but we have to be equally willing to punish violations. In either case, the more public we are with these responses, the better.

Make no mistake, NoD is a difficult subject to talk about, for a variety of reasons. It challenges our current behaviour; it posits the link between deviance and negative outcomes; and it requires all of us to take a hard look at our operating culture and what we are getting rewarded for.

The Italian word “omerta” has come to refer to a code of silence that groups use to enjoin members from breaking ranks and telling the truth about how things work. My experience is that Normalisation of Deviance behaviours are not protected by a deliberate code of silence so much as the weight of a collective culture that guides our thought processes and pushes us to act in ways that – from the outside – make no sense.

The more we can open the windows and shed light on NoD within our project teams and larger organisation, the better equipped we will be to make the necessary corrective steps.

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