

# OPPORTUNITIES IN A PROBLEM

04-2008 Edward J. Fern, MS, PMP (Time-to-Profit, Inc.)

## ***Introduction***

Things are not always what they seem. What may appear to be a lose-lose situation may turn out to be a winning experience.

## ***Ed's Story***

One evening in 1989, I was laying on my couch waiting to watch a baseball game, a World Series game, on television. Another possibility was that I'd doze off and miss some part of the game but, when five o'clock came and went, there was no game. Instead, at about ten minutes after five, I was seeing a picture of a bridge that looked awfully familiar, though I had never noticed the upper deck tilted down onto the lower deck before.

At the time, I lived and worked in Southern California but I'd been to the Bay area many times and the bridge was quite familiar. Turning up the volume, using the remote so I still didn't have to get up, I learned that the Bay had experienced a fairly severe earthquake. I, and baseball fans across the United States, were seeing a picture of the Oakland Bay Bridge in the immediate aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake. It seemed interesting, at a distance of over four hundred miles, but not of great importance to me. Then I heard that Candlestick Park had been rocked by the quake and was being evacuated and there would be no baseball game. Rats!

Candlestick Park is further south than the Bay Bridge and closer to Foster City at the south end of the bay where, as the Director of Network Services for TRW's consumer credit reporting subsidiary, I had responsibility for a network node that served the north-west U.S., Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam. Shaking off the impending nap, I called the network control center and learned that the Foster City node was off line and non-responsive. I also learned that telephone calls to Foster City weren't going through.

This was not a threat we had planned for, but it had ceased to be a risk and was now a problem. Still, there was some risk identification and analysis to be done. My first option was to wait till morning, go into my office, and hope for the best.

I reckoned that I'd be visited by each of our executives, probably one at a time, and that they'd each ask the same two questions: "What's happening?" and "What are you doing about it?" My answers would be, "I don't know, I'm here just like you," and "I'm hoping for the best." Somehow it seemed to me that this course of action might bring on more negative consequences.

The other alternative revolved around leaving my comfortable couch and making a trip north, getting as close to Foster City as I could, and confronting a teenager with a gun who would tell me the area was under martial law and that I could go no further. I'd then have to find a place to wait until the teenager went away. Well, facing the teenager seemed the lesser of two evils. I managed to contact three technicians from my staff in Orange County, went to my bank's ATM to draw out as much cash as it would allow, loaded my Ford Aerostar with tools, spare parts, and the technicians, and set out on the drive up California's central valley.

Apparently somebody remembered the last big earthquake in San Francisco, in 1906, and that the major loss of life and property was a result of the fire that spread in the wake of the quake. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was ten years old and, in accordance with its plan, our National Forest Service played a crucial role in the contingency plan. We must have passed more than 150 Forest Service fire trucks that night, each one racing along at about forty-five miles an hour. At least they broke up what would otherwise have been a sleep inducing drive up a divided highway that has a slight turn about every fifty miles and absolutely nothing on either side of the road to look at except cotton plants and fruit trees.

Astoundingly, the teenager was nowhere to be found. At about four o'clock in the morning, we found ourselves in the parking lot outside the six story office building where our node was housed. We were all scratching our parts trying to think how we might gain entry to the darkened building without a key. We did not want to give the teenager with the gun an opportunity to mistake us for looters who were breaking into the building for fear he might use that as an excuse for target practice.

We did have cell phones, each weighing several pounds and carried in a canvas bag with a shoulder strap, and did try to contact local personnel but those efforts proved futile.

Then another car pulled into the parking lot and into the space beside us. Its sole occupant was an executive with another company in the building. He had a key but, since he had electricity in his home, he was surprised to find the building dark and he had no way to find his way around once inside the building. We introduced ourselves as the bearers of flashlights and made a friendship based solely on pragmatism. He let us in the building and we led the way to a stairway, up two flights of stairs to his office, and eventually up another two flights to our node site.

The office door was closed but, by now, it was clear there were no teen agers about. We had brought along one technician who stood a bit over six feet tall and weighed at least two-hundred-sixty pounds. The adrenaline was rushing as he approached the door. I will never quite understand why, but, his first instinct was to twist the doorknob. The door opened. In their haste to get out of the building, none of the local staff had thought to lock the office door.

We had the node re-assembled by 10:30 but still had no power. The building engineer refused to turn building power back on until the building had been inspected to ensure electricity wouldn't cause a fire. That's when I learned I could still call back to our headquarters in Orange County and that every one of the executives was eager to do anything I might ask to be helpful to an effort they were seeing as heroic.

They would not have understood my great fear of their stupid questions. In any event, TRW rented space from Tishman West in many places around the United States. A call from a TRW executive resulted in a call to a building engineer and that got us electricity without any further debate. The earthquake had broken the pipes that connected our Liebert air conditioner to the cooling tower on the building's roof. We had building air conditioning but no room air conditioning. Fortunately our node room was long and narrow with a door at either end. We calculated that four box fans, two at one end blowing in and two at the other end blowing out, would get us by.

I pulled out my cash fund and sent a technician out to buy the fans. It turns out, you can't buy box fans in the Bay area in October. Once again, I called headquarters and had fans flown to the San Jose airport.

Once a threat has turned into a problem, your project will face new opportunities and threats that are the consequences of the problem. TRW's customers were impressed by our rapid recovery from the earthquake. TRW's executives were impressed by the personnel dedication that made the rapid recovery possible and they were very generous in expressing their appreciation. The people who made the rapid recovery possible learned a great deal about themselves and enjoyed an adventure they will hold as a special memory as long as they live. Yes, I'm describing a whole set of opportunities that we found in a problem.

### ***About the Author***

Ed Fern is a long-time contributor to the practice of Project Management, and his article, *"Six Steps to the Future: How Mass Customizing is Changing the World"* published on the *asapm* website five years ago, continues to be one of the top-rated links on our site.



Ed's websites include [time-to-profit.com](http://time-to-profit.com), his company's main site, and [pm-prepare.com](http://pm-prepare.com), a service that helps you assure yourself that are ready for a popular exam-based PM certification.