

Tinkering with a Treasure: A Project Case Study

By Bill Flury

Background

Some years ago, this tinkerer had the privilege of being selected to be the project manager of a project to refurbish and re-equip the Assembly Chamber in the New York State Capitol building in Albany, New York. The job included many technical, political, and artistic challenges. Just the right combination for a tinkerer.

Known as the "People's Chamber," the home of the New York State Assembly is an historic architectural treasure. Designed in a Moorish-Gothic style – a trademark of its renowned American architect, Leopold Eidlitz, it was dedicated on January 1, 1879 to national acclaim. It is the largest room in the New York State Capitol, the first of the distinctive building's "Grand Spaces". In 1888, it was the first public room in the capitol and the first in the nation to be lit with electric lights.



The Project Team

The contractor team included 11 different specialties, (e.g., construction, lighting, sound, interior design). Their job was to design, build and install new state-of-the-art lighting, sound reinforcement, paging, and electronic voting systems. Along with that, it required replacing the chamber carpet and cleaning and refurbishing all visible features including decorative stone friezes and statuary.

The work began the day after the end of the Assembly session at the end of March and had to be finished completely by the following January 4th when the governor would be coming to the Assembly to present the traditional State-of-the-State address.

The deadline was absolute. Missing the deadline was politically unacceptable. Everything had to go right the first time.

Counsel for the Majority – The Top Decision-Maker

The person in charge of the project was a lawyer whose official title was Counsel to the Majority. He was the chief decision-maker and he held the purse strings for the job. He had no background in engineering or construction or any of the other specialties involved in the work. However, he was politically sensitive and concerned about appearances – how the chamber and its new equipment would look when we finished. The Counsel's charge to our contractor team was three-fold:

1. Finish on time
2. Make sure everything works
3. Make it look great!

We assured him that we knew how to guarantee that we would finish on time and that everything would work. However, when we asked him for guidelines on "Looking Great", he said, "I'll know it when I see it" (This so-called design guideline is usually referred to by just the initial letters of the words, IKIWISI).

Tinkering to the Design

There was no detailed design or specification for the work. There was a list of all the things that had to be upgraded but none had been designed or specified. The contactors were all very knowledgeable about the kinds of items that would be needed, some of which (i.e., special lighting fixtures) would have to be specially fabricated. We concluded that we would have to take a tinkering approach to help the Counsel figure out what he wanted. Here's how we made that work.

Because of the Counsel's intense interest in the appearance of the final product, we agreed on a very careful step by step approach.

1. As we conceived and designed new equipment and installations, we would first do a sketch to show the general idea.
2. After the Counsel agreed to that, we would have an artist draw a picture of what it would look like when installed. If the Counsel liked that, we would go to the next step.
3. We would build a physical mock-up of the item.
4. Then, after approval by the Counsel, we would produce and install the final product.

In each of these steps we tried to make sure that what we were showing was as close as possible to the final in appearance. At each stage of the tinkering, (i.e., rendering mock-up, final) we would tinker with the details until the Counsel “Saw It” and gave us the go-ahead. The process worked well. Sometimes, we would have to tinker a lot with the renderings or models but the end product, a fully satisfied client, was worth the extra effort.

Here are examples of the tinkering at each stage of design of the desk top communications station that included a microphone, speaker, and voting buttons.



Member Desk Rendering



Equipment Mock Up



Final Product

We had all the contractor leads meet at the end of each day to review the sketches and drawings and resolve any conflicts or lingering design and construction issues. Then, we would set the course for the next day. That ensured that there would be no free-lance tinkering by any of the 11 contractors and we would end up with exactly what was agreed to by the Counsel.

Our approach to dealing with an IKIWISI client is called WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). We made sure that he saw everything he was going to get before we built and delivered it. That ensured that there would be no missteps or delays in the project.

Below are photos showing the various steps in developing the voting displays. First a faked photo superimposed on a picture of the wall. Then, a rendering, and then a photo of the final product.



Voting Display Mock Up



Display Rendering



Final Version

Keeping Notes

Several of the contractors carried and used their cameras to capture pictures of problems and progress on their parts of the project. Review of the photos was on the agenda for every morning team meeting. Selected photos were used in meetings with the Counsel.

Photos helped see the unseen. The camera saw it all. The team members all had many distractions while working but the cameras did not. The cameras saw everything and remembered it. Taking photos from the same spots each day allowed the team to see the rate of progress of the demolition and construction in a time-lapse view. They could see what they were getting done.

At the end of the project, the renderings, models and the photos were retained in the project notebooks. Those records documented the tinkering path of the design team. The combination of renderings, models and photos was critical in helping the client and the team see how the requirements were evolving. That was IKIWISI for the client and WYSIWYG for both the client and the team.



Before



After

Tinkering as a Team Works!

About the Author

Since retirement, Bill Flury has been developing and teaching process improvement to help the next generation of project managers and systems engineers succeed by applying the lessons he has learned. Bill is a successful project manager, process improvement consultant and systems engineer with a lifetime record of 85 projects all on-time, within budget and with fully satisfied clients. He successfully developed major government information systems and taught project management and process improvement to government clients.

Bill has published five books with practical advice for all managers. All books are published by Amazon CreateSpace and can be found at: <https://www.amazon.com/author/billflury>

Project Success Stories: Real World Adventures in Project Management shares real stories of successful projects, and the unique paths they took to that success.

Don't Blame Fred: Build Blame Free Processes is full of stories about projects that have become consistently successful by focusing on their project management and work processes.

Draw What You Do: A Practical Approach to Process Improvement describes how to improve the way you work by drawing and using visuals to find better ways to work.

WYSIWYG Tales: See What You Do presents real-life stories from Bill's experience in helping clients see and improve their work processes.

A Tinkerer's Notebook: Sharing the Joy of Tinkering outlines the principles and practices that he and other tinkerers follow to ensure success.

About Forward Momentum, LLC

Forward Momentum, LLC is a woman-owned small business (WOSB) specializing in project management training/consulting, instructional design services, and custom learning solutions for commercial, government, and non-profit organizations. Since 2000, Forward Momentum has grown to develop, manage, and deliver award-winning Instructor-Led Training (ILT), virtual Instructor-Led Training (vILT), eLearning, and blended learning programs physically on five (5) continents and virtually to all seven (7) continents. Our eLearning is rigorously tested by DHS Certified Trusted Testers for Accessibility and is Section 508 compliant.

To date, we have trained over 40,000 people, including over 6,000 on the Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification exam preparation. We co-developed the innovative blended learning PMP® exam preparation program that earned PMI's Professional Development Product of the Year award in 2007. We are a PM Training Alliance® (PMTA) Certified Training Provider (CTP), and Project Management Institute® (PMI) Global Registered Education Provider (REP).

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