

Lessons in Bad Management: Felix the Flying Frog

I first heard the parable of Felix the Flying Frog in the early 1970s. It appears in many places nowadays and its author is unknown. I think its staying power owes to the many points it illustrates – some subtly and some not so subtly. It has great utility as a discussion piece for use in reflecting on life in organizations – and life in general for that matter. Toward that end, you will find some potentially useful questions at the end of this version.

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Once upon a time, there was a man named Clarence who had a pet frog named Felix. Clarence lived a comfortable life based on his salary as a corporate VP but he had a dream of being very, very rich – and famous. One day, hit by sudden inspiration, he exclaimed, "Felix, we're going to be rich and famous! You will learn to fly!"

Felix was terrified at the prospect. "I can't fly, Clarence! I'm a frog, not a bird!" Clarence, disappointed at the initial response, told Felix: "Your attitude isn't helping matters. I think you might benefit from some training."

So off Felix went to a three-day course where he learned about the history of aviation, the basics of aeronautical engineering (e.g., lift, thrust, drag, etc), gliders, parasailing and the lives of famous fliers. (For obvious reasons, the instructor did not mention Icarus.) After the training and on the first day of the "flying lessons," Clarence could barely control his excitement (and Felix could barely control his bladder). Clarence pointed out that their apartment building had seven floors, and each day Felix would jump out of a window, starting with the first floor and working his way up to the top floor. This, Clarence noted, was based on the tried and true behavior change strategy known as "successive approximations."

After each jump, Clarence and Felix would analyze how well he flew, isolate the most effective flying techniques, and implement the improved process for the next flight. By the time they reached the top floor, Felix would surely be able to fly.

Felix pleaded for his life, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. "He just doesn't understand how important this is," thought Clarence. "He can't see the big picture."

So, with that, Clarence opened the window and threw Felix out. He landed with a thud.

The next day, poised for his second flying lesson, Felix again begged not to be thrown out of the window. Clarence opened his pocket guide to "Managing More Effectively," and showed Felix the part about how one must always expect resistance when introducing new, innovative programs. With that, he threw Felix out the window again. THUD!

On the third day (on the third floor), Felix tried a different ploy: stalling. He asked for a delay in the "project" until better weather would make flying conditions more favorable. But Clarence was ready for him: He pulled out his Blackberry, pulled up a timeline, pointed to the third milestone and said, "You don't want to mess up the schedule, do you?"

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From his performance appraisal feedback, Felix knew that not jumping today meant he would have to jump TWICE tomorrow. So he just muttered, "OK, let's go." And out the window he went.

Now this is not to say that Felix wasn't trying his best. On the fifth day he flapped his legs madly in a vain attempt at flying. On the sixth day, he tried "visualization." He tied a small red cape around his neck and tried to think "Superman" thoughts. It didn't help.

By the seventh day, Felix, accepting his fate, no longer begged for mercy. He simply looked at Clarence and said, "You know you're killing me, don't you?"

Clarence pointed out that Felix's performance so far had been less than exemplary; failing to meet any of the milestones he had set for him. With that, Felix said quietly, "Shut up and open the window." He leaped out, taking careful aim at the pointed sculpture by the corner of the building.

And Felix went to that great lily pad in the sky.

Clarence was devastated. His project failed to meet a single objective he set out to accomplish. Felix not only failed to fly, he hadn't even learned to steer his fall; instead, he dropped like a sack of cement. Nor had Felix heeded Clarence's advice to "Fall smarter, not harder."



The only thing left for Clarence to do was to conduct an after-action-review and try to determine where things had gone wrong. First, he had to dispose of Felix' battered body, which he did by dumping it in a nearby trash can. Later, after reviewing the records and giving the data much thought, Clarence smiled knowingly and said, "Next time, I'm getting a smarter frog!"

Some Questions:

- How did Clarence's expectations get so out of line with Felix' capabilities and how might better alignment have been achieved?
- Why did Clarence reach so quickly for training as a solution?
- What role did the power differential between Clarence and Felix play in shaping the course of events?
- Why was Felix so compliant, even in the face of his own destruction?

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- What blinded Clarence to the role he played in the failure of his attempt to make Felix fly?
- What talent did Felix possess that might actually have made Clarence and he rich and why didn't Clarence see that?