

Inverting Murphy

"If something can go wrong, it probably will": we all know Murphy's Law! But do we know it well enough? Let's take a closer look at this painful-seeming fact of life, and see what it really has to show us...

For a start, notice that word 'probably': although it's often ignored or even missing, it's actually the most important part of Murphy's Law. It's the part that reminds that, no matter how much we may want our business, our world, to be predictable, controlled, certain, the reality is that it isn't - and can't be.

The world is uncertain: that's a scientific fact. And Murphy's Law isn't just a law, it's *the* law - the only real law we know. Yet think about it for a moment: if it's a law, then it has to apply to everything - including itself. If Murphy's Law can go wrong, it probably will go wrong, too. Whatever it is that makes things go wrong itself goes wrong most of the time - which is what gives us that dangerous illusion of certainty.

So yes, as we know only too well, things can indeed go wrong, in the worst possible way, and at the worst possible time. Yet most of the time, all that's really 'wrong' is our own illusions, our own wishful thinking. One of the best ways to reduce the impact of Murphy's Law in business is to support each other in facing our illusions - and not search around for someone to blame as soon as something unexpected happens by!

More important, though, Murphy's Law also shows us that things can go right - if we let them. Murphy rightly warns us that things can go wrong in ways we least expect; but it also tells us that things can go right, too, in exactly the same weird ways. And if we only allow things to go right in expected ways, we're limiting our chances...

Risk-management, disaster-recovery planning, insurances against everything and anything: many companies go to extremes to protect themselves from the downside of Murphy's Law. Yet it's noticeable that few people, and fewer organisations, seem to have any systematic plans to cope with Murphy's upside: the chance comments and random encounters - all of them outside of our control - which provide the key source for business opportunities and business growth.

It certainly seems that most people are more comfortable facing failure than facing success. How true is this of you, though? If things went wrong today at work today - spectacularly wrong - you'd probably have some kind of plan for how to deal with it. But if things went right - spectacularly right - in some equally unexpected way, would you know what to do? Worth thinking about, perhaps?

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