The Power of Stupidity

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Chapter 4 – Murphy's Law

A well known fact, closely connected to human stupidity, is that often "things don't work." We shall discuss some interesting observations on this subject in the next two chapters. But let's start with the most popular definition of this problem. It's called "Murphy's Law" – and it has been repeated and quoted widely for sixty years. Of course it was true, and largely confirmed by facts, thousands of years ago. But with confused culture, clumsy government, hasty and near-sighted management, financial gambling and messy technologies, its effects tend to multiply.

It was never stated as a "scientific law." It's just a "saying" and it's often supposed to be funny. But it's worth taking quite seriously.

There are conflicting theories about how it started, but for the sake of these considerations let's assume that it was a comment by an Air Force technical officer, Captain Edward Murphy, in 1949, in a specific case of human stupidity: someone had risked his life because some instrument hadn't been set correctly.

Whatever the origin, or the occasion from which it was born, the fact is that it has become proverbial. *«If something can go wrong, it will, at the worst possible time.»* [1]

On Murphy's Law there is a vast literature, often amusing, with countless variants and corollaries (many are just funny, but some are practically relevant) applied to different situations and all sorts of activities, but generally with the same basic meaning. [2]

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[1] The same concept is defined in a variety of "sayings", such as *Sod's Law* – or *Finagle's Law* as mentioned in a footnote in chapter 1. *Flanagan's Precept* says that *«both Murphy and Finagle were incurable optimists.»*

[2] There are many collections and anthologies. Some are online, such as *Murphy's Laws* (`murphys-laws.com`) and *Murphy's Laws and Corollaries* (`roso.epfl.ch/dm/murphy.html`).

Joking on the subject can be fun – and maybe we can be lucky. Things don't always go wrong. But it's a real problem that they do, and that isn't just "grumbling" by Murphy or whoever is saying the same thing. It's the wisdom of knowing how things happen – and being prepared for "unexpected" glitches.

Sometimes things can go surprisingly better. But it would be stupid to expect them to counterbalance those that go worse.

Countless variations on "Murphy's Law" don't tell us why things go wrong. Often the mess is so malicious that it seems to be the work of some mischievous gremlin. But it's pretty clear that the most frequent origin is human stupidity.

It can be our own stupidity, because we have made a mistake, we haven't checked as carefully as we should, or we have failed to consider a variable whose effects come into play when we least expect them.

Or it can be someone else's stupidity. Someone near to us, who has done something wrong – or is making things unnecessarily complicated.

Or maybe someone, we may not know who, how or where, somehow caused us to have wrong or misleading information – or designed a tool that breaks down "at the worst possible time." [3]

"Murphy's Law", if properly understood, is a resource for intelligence. The point is that the unexpected is practically unavoidable. Because we are never able to control all variables. Or because some external factors, that we can't control, come into play when they are least expected.

There are several ways of coping with this problem so that we are not "taken by total surprise." One is to have an effective backup of solutions that can replace the one that suddenly isn't working. Another is flexible planning, that treats the unexpected not as an obstacle, but as a different route to the objective – or maybe the opening of a new opportunity.

Above all, it's important to know that the unexpected exists – and be mentally prepared to face it. Not to be confused or scared, but to be ready to find new solutions, to meet new opportunities, to learn from the stimulating experience of change. (See the appendix *Simple Thoughts on Complexity* – online `gandalf.it/stupid/chaos.htm`)

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An interesting (but rarely understood) "corollary" to Murphy's Law is that, if a problem has a way of solving itself, it will do so when there is a state of alarm, several actions are in place to try to fix it, etcetera. One of the consequences of this fact, more often than it may seem, is that in some situations the best solution is to "wait and see" without making any move – but of course it's difficult to know beforehand in which circumstances this may be the most effective behavior.

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[3] See chapter 19 *The Stupidity of Technologies* – or online `gandalf.it/offline/stutech.htm`

It helps to know that this sort of thing can happen quite often – and be ready to cancel the alarm before the remedies turn out to be worse than the disease or cause unnecessary panic, confusion and complications. And, above all (in such cases and in any other difficult circumstance) to be willing to admit *«I made a mistake.»* Insisting on errors, or false alarms, is a dangerous form of stupidity.

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So Murphy's Law is a serious concern, but not a reason for despair or "giving up." Quite to the contrary, it's a tool for knowledge – and for effective planning, management and behavior.

If we pretend – or assume – that there are "infallible" or totally reliable technologies, methods or plans… we are heading for bitter, sometimes catastrophic, surprises. As Douglas Adams explained: *«The major difference between a thing that might go wrong and a thing that cannot possibly go wrong is that when a thing that cannot possibly go wrong goes wrong it usually turns out to be impossible to get at or repair.»*

If in any large or small project (making coffee, organizing a journey or building a dam) we consider the unavoidable "Murphy phenomena", we can organize it with the appropriate flexibility, consider the mistakes and the unexpected circumstances as likely variants and not unmanageable mishaps.

So we can reduce anxiety, improve quality and avoid the awful mess that is generated by the unexpected and multiplies all sorts of mistakes.

Let's be grateful to Edward Murphy (or whoever else is the real author of the "law") and let's try to make good use of his bright observation, as often as possible, in everything we do. We shall get better results and, at the same time, a considerable improvement in "quality of life."

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it