When the Dog Catches the Car

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The "Dog Catches the Car" metaphor describes a situation in which an individual or entity pursues a goal or desire with great enthusiasm, only to find they are unprepared for what happens after they achieve it.

The metaphor proceeds with great simplicity: the dog runs after the car, full of excitement, but once it catches up, it has no idea what to do with it. The dog can't drive, eat, or play with the car meaningfully. Once the vehicle stops, the dog is left perplexed, unable to return things to the once happy, moving state it previously so thoroughly enjoyed.

This image is reflected in a well-known Gary Larson cartoon, first published on May 25, 1985, in which a dog, leaning out from the car's window, excitedly tells another dog that after running errands with its owner, it will go to the vet to get "tutored." Completely mishearing the word, "neutered."

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The humor works on several levels: The dog boasts about its privilege, unaware that its joyride will soon lead to a painful and life-changing reality. The tragic irony mirrors situations in business, particularly government contracting, where unforeseen complications, constraints, and risks may follow success.

The Situation

Consider a government contractor who wins a highly coveted contract to develop a new software solution for a federal agency. The contractor has spent years working toward this goal, and with the contract signed and the scope of work (SOW) defined, the excitement is palpable. However, once the project begins, the contractor quickly discovers that fulfilling the contract is far more complex than anticipated.

The team soon finds itself entangled in internal agency politics. Different departments prioritize conflicting needs, making collaboration difficult. Turf wars and shifting priorities emerge, further complicating the process. Rather than a smooth, efficient rollout, the project becomes bogged down by inefficiencies, scope creep, and missed deadlines. The once-clear path to success is now fraught with obstacles—mirroring the "Dog Catches the Car" metaphor.

Government contracts often include boilerplate clauses, such as "Additional Tasks" or "General Duties," which can impose unexpected responsibilities on contractors. Worse, the government may invoke a "Termination for Convenience" clause, allowing them to cancel the contract for any reason, sometimes with little or no notice. While these clauses make sense from a fiduciary perspective, they are often seen as tools used to manage risk or conflict. This creates uncertainty for contractors, who may have invested significant resources only to see the project abruptly terminated.

Moreover, when contracts are terminated, employees and subcontractors often face layoffs, leading to a cycle of turnover. The new contractor may retain some workers, but at lower pay, creating instability. This churn mirrors the unpredictability the dog faces after catching the car. Success in winning a contract can be fleeting as turnover and disruption continuously impact operations.

The Challenge of Soft Skills

The growing reliance on contractors over federal employees has further complicated the government workforce. The total number of federal employees has remained relatively stable, while the number of contractors has surged, resulting in a more fragmented work environment. Contractors and federal employees frequently clash with different priorities and work cultures, exacerbating internal conflicts.

In the broader workplace, *Workfront* (2017) reports that team-based conflicts have become more common, with 95% of office workers reporting conflict between teams, up from 81% in 2014. Familiar sources of these conflicts include poor communication, clashing priorities, and

misunderstandings about urgency. In government contracting, these conflicts can severely hinder productivity, just as miscommunications and shifting expectations derail project success.

As the workplace becomes more complex, the importance of soft skills—such as emotional intelligence, communication, empathy, active listening, negotiation, and relationship-building—has risen. Corporate training programs now emphasize both technical proficiency and soft skills, recognizing that understanding and managing interpersonal dynamics is just as important as technical know-how. In government contracting, working with people and managing conflicts is crucial for long-term success.

Realistic vs. Unrealistic Conflict

Recognizing the distinction between realistic and unrealistic conflict is critical to resolving these disputes. Realistic conflict, as defined by Morton Deutsch in 1973, refers to disputes grounded in tangible, achievable goals. These conflicts, though adversarial, can lead to positive outcomes if managed effectively, resulting in stronger relationships and better alignment. In contrast, unrealistic conflict stems from exaggerated expectations, emotional reactions, and misunderstandings. Such conflicts are often based on unattainable goals and escalate into destructive behavior, undermining progress.

When these conflicts occur in the government workspace, they are invariably laid at the foot of the contractor, no matter what.

In government contracting, as in any business environment, it's crucial to recognize when conflicts result from realistic concerns and when they are unrealistic. Focusing on realistic conflict allows contractors and agencies to work together to resolve disputes constructively, align expectations, and move forward. Shifting from destructive, unrealistic conflict to tangible, solution-oriented discussions is critical to successful project management.

The Need for Conflict Analysis Training

These dynamics underscore the need for conflict analysis and dispute resolution training.

Contractors and government agencies must equip their teams with the skills to manage difficult conversations, analyze the root causes of conflict, and determine when to escalate issues. This proactive approach to conflict management can make the difference between success and failure in government contracting and broader organizational contexts.

More is needed than relying solely on soft skills in these situations. While technical expertise, strategic thinking, and management acumen are important conflict analysis techniques are

equally important. Contractors must develop a balanced approach that includes hard and soft skills to navigate the complex, often unpredictable landscape of government projects. This holistic approach—combining the ability to manage people with the tools to resolve logistical and interpersonal issues—is crucial to ensuring long-term success in contracting environments.

Conclusion

In both the "Dog Catches the Car" metaphor and the world of government contracting, success often comes with unforeseen challenges and complications. Whether the dog's excitement upon catching the car or a contractor's initial confidence after winning a project, the reality frequently proves more complex than anticipated. Both scenarios underscore the importance of preparation, adaptability, and a holistic approach to problem-solving when navigating unexpected obstacles.

The enthusiasm for securing a deal in government contracting can quickly fade as contractors face internal politics, shifting priorities, and communication breakdowns. While soft skills such as emotional intelligence, effective communication, and relationship-building are essential, they must be paired with technical expertise, strategic foresight, and a deep understanding of the contract's terms. Relying solely on these qualities is no longer enough in the dynamic and often unpredictable landscape of government contracting.

In addition to these skills, contractors must develop a strong foundation in conflict analysis and dispute resolution techniques. These tools enable teams to identify when conflicts are based on realistic issues—such as resource constraints or differing priorities—and when they are rooted in unrealistic expectations or misunderstandings. Addressing conflict at the right level and at the right time is crucial to preventing escalation and minimizing disruptions.

The rise of contract workers, frequent turnover, and the unpredictability of government contracts add layers of complexity. Contractors must be adept not only at managing people but also at applying conflict resolution strategies to navigate real-world challenges. Success in government contracting increasingly depends on the ability to combine technical know-how with a strong grasp of conflict dynamics and structured approaches to dispute resolution. This balance—of both hard and soft skills—will distinguish those contractors who thrive from those who, like the dog, find themselves unprepared when the music stops.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:
https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/dog_catches_car.pdf

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