

Mark Rutland: Obamacare Rollout and the Vasa Ship Syndrome

In 1628, the king of Sweden was Gustavus Adolphus. Intimidated by the great naval powers of Europe, he decided Sweden should burst onto the stage with a resounding statement.

King Adolphus commissioned the *Vasa* ship and ordered that it be one of the greatest seagoing vessels of the day. Furthermore, he wanted it to be a veritable work of art, a ship so beautiful that his neighboring monarchs would see what a sophisticated and creative nation Sweden was. Of course, he also wanted the ship's ordinance to be so impressive that his contemporary monarchs would get the message that Sweden's king was a power to be reckoned with.

The Swedish designers, artists and artisans lent a whole new meaning to the phrase "spare no expense." I have seen the restored *Vasa* ship in an impressive museum in Stockholm, and it is absolutely incredible. Every inch of the ship is decorated elaborately, and its 64 gun ports bristle ominously—as many guns, in fact, as I have ever seen on a sailing vessel. It looked like what it was: a fabulously flamboyant work of art armed to the teeth. It was like a massive birthday cake with ominous artillery amidst the icing. At a cost that very nearly bankrupted Sweden, the incredible warship was at last finished.

The night before it was to launch, a naval engineer decided to conduct a "run test." Such a test is exactly what it sounds like. He put dozens of sailors on the deck and had them run back and forth, measuring how badly they rocked the ship. He saw it immediately. *Badly* was hardly the word for it. He told his colleagues that if the rows of guns on one side of the

ship were fired at once, the recoil would likely sink her. No one actually doubted his report. The problem was not with his evidence. The problem was political. Who would tell the king?

The answer turned out to be no one. The next day, when the *Vasa* ship was christened and launched with pomp and circumstance, she sailed brilliantly for less than a nautical mile before the guns fired a salute, tipping her exactly as the engineer predicted, and she sank. Among the lives lost were families of officers and dignitaries who were on board for the tragic maiden voyage.

When senior leadership is inaccessible and unapproachable, catastrophe is lurking around the corner. Executives who gain a reputation for shooting messengers with bad news rapidly lose track of institutional reality. Who wants to tell that kind of boss the truth and take a bullet? Employees and followers would rather lie low and let his ship sink.

Great leaders seek the truth, keeping lines of communication open to hear all the news, all the facts, all the dangers, all the problems. Petty tyrants want sycophants who will tell them how smart and talented and brilliant they are and that their plans are sure to be a resounding success. Great leaders put the word out and honor their word: Tell me the truth. Plead with me to wait, to go another way, to build it smaller or better or differently. But tell me the truth!

One of the fundamental rules—a truly basic rule—of quality management concerns new product rollout. When prudence and speed to market collide, as they often will, the answers to several questions are of utmost importance. The answers to these questions will—and in fact must—preside over the time frame for rollout.

1. What is the risk of failure?

How confident are the people who really know the product? Not the sales staff. Not the PR people. Especially not big shots

who, way too often, make decisions out of some hidden agenda without regard to the “little people” who have to try and make sense of the senseless decisions of senior management. The “nuts and bolts” people have to express confidence in the product and in its readiness for market. They have to be assured they will not be punished for sincere opinions that run contrary to what senior management wants to hear.

Until and unless an atmosphere of honesty without retribution is fostered, the people who know if it's a train wreck waiting to happen will keep their heads down and their mouths shut. They reckon exposing themselves upfront is an unwelcome risk. They figure they are more likely to survive the train wreck than express any honest appraisal that slows the project management is hot to trot out. The problem is they are probably right.

2. If it fails, how bad can it get?

Will a failure bring ruin on the entire company or church or whatever? Or will it rather be a minor embarrassment? Will the recall be huge and massively expensive? Or will it damage the confidence of our customers and constituents? The answer to this is of critical importance. The bottom line is: Will it cost us more to delay rollout or to fix the mess once it fails to meet expectations? Here is another question along the same lines: If you don't have time to get it right, when will you have time to fix it?

3. Why are we hurrying?

This is the most challenging of all the questions in the path to rollout. What is the rush? Are we afraid the competition will get the drop on us? This is a genuine issue, of course, but it is not necessarily the final answer. Yes, it's nice to be first to market. However, caution may allow us to avoid some mistakes the competition will make and may give us time to put out a better product.

4. Do we have all the facts from all the right people?

The wise decision-maker wants to hear from everybody, especially the real people, the ones who know if the wheels are likely to come off. Wisdom lies with upfront institutional reality, even if it is not what I want to hear and slows down the announced timetable. A little embarrassment over delay is nothing compared to a sinking ship.

How It All Relates to Obamacare

Answer to Question 1: The risk of failure was obvious and had to have been obvious to many tech-savvy people involved in the Obamacare rollout. There is absolutely no way that intelligent IT folks didn't know the risk of exactly what has happened and the huge tech embarrassment. Furthermore, they must have known the website shipwreck would be as bad as it has been. I am absolutely certain there were knowledgeable people involved in the website who went home to their spouse at night and said, "This stupid ship is going to sink."

Answer to Question 2: The Obama administration has become so confident in its salesmanship—especially in its senior salesman—that it failed to answer question number two. They did not believe it could cause the kind of PR nightmare they are experiencing now. Companies that underestimate the negative reaction to an underprepared rollout do so at their own substantial risk.

Answer to Question 3: The failure of the Obama administration to confront question three honestly lies at the heart of the rollout debacle. Politics. Politics and ego. Beat the Republicans. Delay might give our opposition ammunition. This is our signature legislation, so we cannot delay. We are who we are. No matter what anyone says. We never fail at anything, and we won't fail at this.

Companies and organizations that begin to think they cannot blow it are prime targets for a shipwreck. Prime targets!

Answer to Question 4: Recently, the Obama administration temporarily shut the website down and called in experts from the best tech companies in the private sector. Why didn't they do that before the crash? The reasons are twofold. They were arrogant enough to believe they needed no help, and like so many, they did not really want to know the truth.

It is the worst of detached management to shove a massive, nationwide undertaking constantly downward, not ask enough questions, not get the right people on the task and be arrogant enough to believe it will just turn out all right. This is us. This is the beautiful people. We cannot possibly fail. And if we do, no one will really hold us accountable. That is just asking for a catastrophe.

I have no prediction to make about the future of Obamacare. I am merely commenting on the failed rollout. I will say this: I am confident that whatever hiccup delaying the rollout might have caused, it would have been far less damaging than the pain of this mess.

Ready to roll out a new plan or program or website or whatever? Ask yourself and your team the questions above and demand honest answers. And then ask yourself this final question: Which is better—a slightly embarrassing delay or a shipwreck?

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