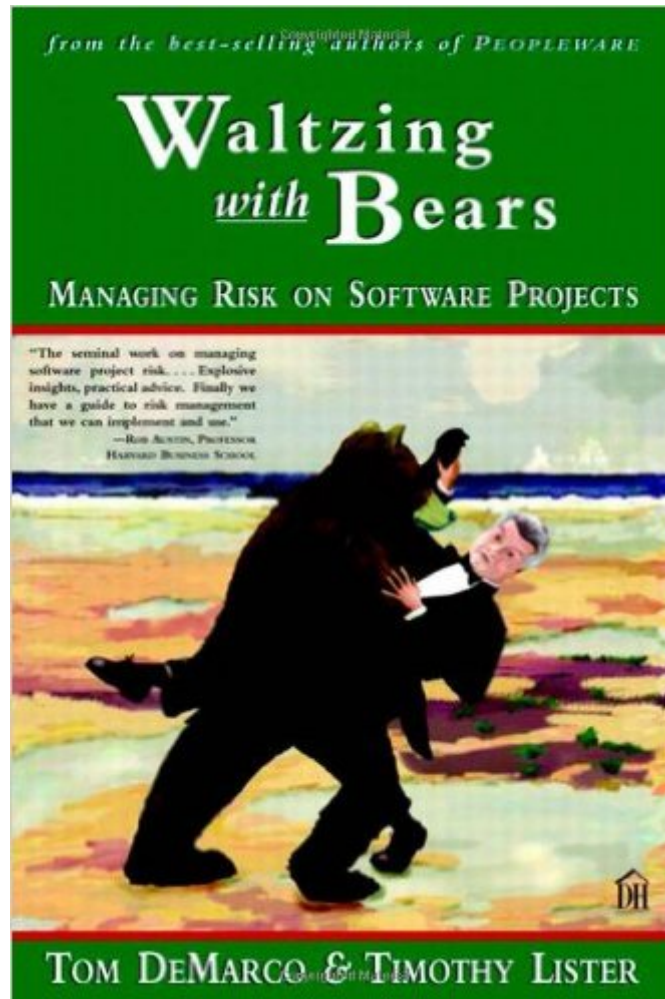


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Waltzing With Bears: Managing Risk On Software Projects



Synopsis

Any software project that's worth starting will be vulnerable to risk. Since greater risks bring greater rewards, a company that runs away from risk will soon find itself lagging behind its more adventurous competition. By ignoring the threat of negative outcomes—in the name of positive thinking or a Can-Do attitude—software managers drive their organizations into the ground. In *Waltzing with Bears*, Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister—the best-selling authors of *Peopleware*—show readers how to identify and embrace worthwhile risks. Developers are then set free to push the limits. You'll find that risk management * makes aggressive risk-taking possible * protects management from getting blindsided * provides minimum-cost downside protection * reveals invisible transfers of responsibility * isolates the failure of a subproject. Readers are taught to identify the most common risks faced by software projects: * schedule flaws * requirements inflation * turnover * specification breakdown * and under-performance. Packed with provocative insights, real-world examples, and project-saving tips, *Waltzing with Bears* is your guide to mitigating the risks—before they turn into problems.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is an interesting mix. It starts with a philosophical discussion of why it is ethically wrong and success-endangering to ignore risks, but commercially weak to simply avoid them, thus establishing that we must accept and manage risk. The book then develops a comprehensive method for risk management in IT (or other) projects. It may be surprising where DeMarco & Lister

start from, explaining what risk is, why we need to accept it and why we must manage it, but they explain how common attitudes in the IT industry, which they correctly term "pathologies", can make it almost impossible to properly acknowledge and manage risks. Maybe it's my background as a physicist, but I assumed that most project managers understand the concept of uncertainty in estimates of cost, timescale and benefits. The authors clearly start from the opposite position. This may be a little off-putting for some readers, but will definitely help those to whom this is a new concept, while the use of "uncertainty diagrams" (probability profiles) will be a useful addition to the toolkit even for those more familiar with the underlying ideas. The book is very strong on how risk impacts budget and schedule, and how to more scientifically make goals and committed targets more realistic. There's a very good discussion of how to assess deadlines using probability theory, which shows the folly of trying to manage large efforts by single deadlines. The book also includes a very good section on brainstorming and analysing different stakeholders' "win" conditions to identify potential risks.

At a certain fundamental level, projects are about how well one manages the risks in the process of achieving the project objectives. Projects by their very nature and scope of effort entails some level of risk (major or minor), but unfortunately the concept of recognizing and managing the risks is sorely absent in majority of IT projects. And for those of us who have been involved in IT projects, this book is a stark reminder of how poorly risks are managed. I found this book very useful in understanding the thought process behind risk management and more importantly the challenges and difficulties in implementing them. I have seen projects where Risk management is nothing more than symbolic maintenance of a risk log, which is more "CYA", than anything practically useful. Ofcourse, many other projects don't even maintain this token log too. There are some striking observations in this book, which is commonsense, but gets lost in the thicket of our daily project management duties. One of them is about the project delays: "When a project strays from schedule, it's seldom because the work planned just took longer than anyone had thought; a much more common explanation is that the project got bogged down doing work that wasn't planned at all. Most software project managers do a reasonable job of predicting the tasks that have to be done and a poor job of predicting the tasks that might have to be done." Another one is about schedule estimates: "Software managers have tended to follow a standard rule: The Estimate and the goal are identical. The discipline of risk management though will counsel you to use goals as you always have to help people strive for best performance.

There are some very sensible, eminently implementable ideas in this book, even if you have nothing to do with risk management. It is not just about risk, and neither is it just about software projects. Yes, there are strong elements of both, but the discussion is not exclusive. Some of the practical matters discussed include being able to recognise a 'dead' project before it finally rolls over and is declared dead. If there is no life in the beast, then it is no use preserving the carcass. Risk has become a vogue word in software development. Everybody talks about it, and says that it is being considered. However, a large part of the discussion is lip service. What is apparent is that 'risk' is not a small subject, and any discussion on this subject will invariably involve weighty matters. How can benefits be calculated? How are costs determined? So is risk inherently wrong? Risk involves uncertainty. Halfway down the first page of Chapter 1 is a wonderful statement, summing up the gains to be claimed by embarking on a risky venture. "If a project has no risks, don't do it". The authors slay a few myths along the way. It is not wrong to be uncertain. Risk is about trying to minimise the uncertainties, or rather to minimise the damage caused by events that you hope will not happen. Therefore, if you don't know, ask questions about what you do not know. That is very different to some work places, where it is considered bad form to raise items on the risk register. There are instances when blindly obvious risks have not been considered. "Oh, you mean THAT train" - as it speeds towards you. Projects that negotiate dark railroad tunnels will find trains hurtling towards them. FACT. It is the nightmares that need to be addressed, not the petty worries.

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