



# Why Things Go Wrong

There's Much More to It than Murphy's Law

by Charles Waldo, PhD


**DURING THE 50+ YEARS** I have been a church member, I have been involved with or watched any number of projects and programs try to get off the planning board with some even making it, but few went off as planned. Ditto for the 50+ years I have been in business and/or academia. “Something” always went wrong. Before retiring as a professor from Anderson (Indiana) University’s Professional MBA program, I taught numerous sections of the Managing Change course and collected many “war stories” from students showing few new or revamped projects or programs ever fully met their objectives and a surprising number never even got off the ground or went under shortly thereafter. What about at your church?

Why this dismal success rate? It is so easy to blame everything on Murphy and his (her?) infamous law—“If anything can go wrong, it will.” Murphy’s Law, however, is more of an observation *of* rather than an explanation *for* program and project

failure. Over the years I have collected hundreds of laws, axioms, postulates, corollaries, and observations that more fully explain why things so often go wrong. Here are a few of my favorites that you will probably relate to:

- **Chisholm’s Second Law:** When things seem like they cannot possibly get worse, they will. (Also sometimes known as **Gattuso’s Extension of Murphy.**) Relates to **Boling’s Postulate:** If you are feeling good, do not worry: bad things will soon happen to get you over it.
- **Gumperson’s Law:** The probability of anything happening is in inverse ratio to its desirability.
- **Finnegan’s Axiom:** The farther away the deadline on a project, the more doable it looks. The inverse is also true.
- **The Non-Reciprocal Laws of Expectations:** Negative expectations will yield negative results. Positive expectations will yield negative results.
- **Howe’s Observation:** Everyone has a plan that will *not* work but you will find this out too late to do anything about it.
- **Ehrmann’s Commentary:** 1) Things will get worse before they get better. 2) But who said things will ever get better?
- **Wellington’s Law of Command:** The cream always rises to the top. So, too, does scum. Relates to **Sturgeon’s Observation:** 90% of everything is *definitely* crud; the other 10% is suspect.
- **Kushner’s Observation:** The chances of anyone taking initiative and doing something positive is inversely proportional to the number of other people who are in a position to do it instead, but probably will not. **Lynch’s Law** correlates—When the going gets tough, everyone leaves.
- **Mollison’s Bureaucratic Hypothesis:** If an idea can survive a church council’s thorough review and be approved for implementation, it is not worth doing. If attempted, it will fail.

- **Conway's Observation:** In any organization, including churches, there will be one person who actually knows what is going on. That person will soon leave for one reason or another.
- **Waldo's Corollary to Conway:** Never let your boss know you are smarter than he is.
- **Owen's Corollaries to Conway:**
  1. Every organization has an allotted number of positions to be filled by misfits.
  2. Once one misfit leaves, another must be recruited.
- **Anonymous:** It is impossible to make anything foolproof since fools are so ingenious and plentiful.
- Because everything takes longer than planned, use **Westheimer's Rule** to project how long a job might *really* take: Estimate the time you believe the task should take, multiply by two, and change the time measure to the next highest unit. Thus, we allocate two days for a one-hour task.
- **Benedict's Principles:**
  1. Nature always sides with the hidden flaw and
  2. The hidden flaw will only reveal itself after it is too late to do anything about it.
- **The Final Law:** If several things that could have gone wrong did NOT go wrong, it would have been ultimately beneficial if they had.
- **Authenticity:** It has been widely rumored but never proven that Murphy did not invent Murphy's Law but, rather, it was derived by someone else with the same name.

Have these observations and principles been helpful to smoother and more effective administration of your church? If so, look at them more carefully. You have missed something. Remember, Murphy was an optimist. 

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