

# Don't Let the Bedbugs Bite

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My partner and I recently stayed at a wonderful little coastal hotel in New England. The location was perfect, the room attractive and comfortable, and the view of a pretty little cove from our windows appealing. Sue and George, the proprietors, had thought of everything for a delightful stay.

The receptionist greeted us with afternoon tea and home-baked cookies, and a fire burning in the lounge fireplace welcomed us back from dinner. The staff had set out decanters of port and Madeira for us to enjoy along with a board game or book from the well-stocked shelves. It was all very pleasant, and we were charmed to be there for the last real night of our vacation, despite having to pay a room rate that blew our usual budget.

Before retiring for the night, I was sitting in bed uploading the day's photos onto my laptop. My partner, who had just settled down, said, "Oh dear, there's a ladybug in the bed. Can you get it?" I tried catching the bug, which was as large as a ladybug and about the same shape, but most definitely not a ladybug. It was rust colored and looked furry. The bug disappeared under the pillow I'd been propped against, so I lifted it and found half a dozen more! Without thinking, I shook the bugs off the pillow into the toilet and flushed it. But I was starting to think they must be something nasty, and when another one appeared, I caught it and threw it in to drown, but didn't flush.

We rushed downstairs and rang for the hoteliers. The word "bugs" was a powerful trigger that brought George out in his pajamas. In what seemed like seconds, the three of us were upstairs looking at the dead bug in the loo. George peered down and said, "Oh my God! That's a bedbug."

While obviously horrified, George was very decisive. He moved us to the room next door, which was larger and more expensive. He asked us to shower and wash our hair before moving, to take only the clothes we absolutely needed, and to examine them carefully for more bugs. Meanwhile, he started disinfecting the infested room.

George and Sue worked diligently. The bedding and pillows were sealed in trash bags for disposal. They sprayed our luggage with a disinfectant, then bagged and sealed it. They didn't want us to take any bugs with us, either to another hotel or, even worse, home.

After stripping the bed, Sue sprayed the wicker headboard. That's when we all saw movement--the bugs were hiding out in the spaces between the wicker fibers!

Eventually, we managed to fall asleep in our new room. At 8:00 the next morning, George phoned. He said that his pest control people were arriving in an hour, and they had a new protocol for dealing with bedbugs. George asked if we would be willing to

meet with them, so we could be informed of the right steps to take to protect us from carrying the infestation. We accepted!

The pest control people were draconian. They advised spraying the adjoining rooms as well as the infested room. They wanted the mattress destroyed. All our clothes would have to be washed in hot water and dried on high heat for at least forty-five minutes. Our luggage would have to be cleaned with a petroleum-based disinfectant. They also suggested that anything of ours that had been on the bed should be discarded.

Then they tore down the bed we had slept in to show us it was bug-free. They said they would never lie down in any hotel bed without first doing this.

Again, Sue and George were decisive. They offered to wash and dry all our stuff and to replace anything that didn't survive the hot laundering, as well as anything we needed to throw out. Since we had to wait for the laundry, they suggested we go and explore a picturesque town nearby and buy the things we needed to replace immediately.

When we checked out of the hotel, we left with two complimentary copies of their cookbook, a reimbursement for the things we'd bought, and a promise to pay for anything else we had to replace. And, of course, they didn't charge for the room.

George and Sue had done a splendid job of crisis management in the face of potential catastrophe, and thus saved the reputation of their business.

I was struck by the contrast between their swift, effective action and the behavior I have seen on software projects, where crises go largely unmanaged and frequently even unrecognized.

Crises occur all too often in the software world. Whether a major bank doubles its nightly account updates as a result of a "quick" production fix, or a mysterious test environment connectivity problem stops a big, expensive project in its tracks, we all have endured crises that could have been resolved much more quickly and effectively with skilled crisis management.

My own expertise is in test management rather than crisis management, but I have had several opportunities on troubled projects to learn some of the techniques from an expert. Marie, the best project manager I know, is a highly skilled risk manager and--a rarity--someone with formal training in crisis management. Recalling how the hoteliers dealt with their crisis, I recognized patterns I have learned from Marie.

- **Recognize that you have a crisis that requires urgent attention.** This was George and Sue's first essential step.
- **Contain the problem on two fronts: the customers and the situation.** George addressed both by first giving us a nice room where we could feel safe, while making sure we didn't take any bugs with us. Then he and Sue took action to spray, bag, and dispose of anything in the original room that might be infested.
- **Protect what can likely be salvaged.** George and Sue worked to protect our luggage and clothing. Again, they were taking care of their customers (and stakeholders in the problem) at the same time.

- **Call in the experts.** George and Sue did this as soon as possible, so the experts could review their actions so far, suggest the next very important steps to address the problem, and plan and take action to secure the future.
- **Listen to the experts.** George and Sue didn't just call in the experts; they listened, asked intelligent questions, and took the experts' advice.
- **Communicate frequently with the stakeholders.** George and Sue brought us into the planning session with the experts and then followed up several times to keep us up to date.
- **Be open and honest.** George and Sue did not attempt at any time to minimize the problem or put a spin on it.
- **Make managing the crisis your top priority.** Sue and George did not neglect the ordinary running of the hotel--they left that to their staff and gave their personal attention to the crisis. Together, they attended to the crisis full time until it was over.
- **Define clear criteria for knowing when the crisis has ended.** For Sue and George, the worst was probably over when we left the hotel and they could revert to normal processes for implementing the new protocol against bedbugs.
- **Do not attempt to nickel and dime.** George and Sue's customer relationship was critical to them. They took care to manage it impeccably throughout the crisis.
- **Learn about handling crises before they happen.** The speed and savvy with which Sue and George responded suggests that they had at least some rapid response training as well as education about handling a pest problem.

How does Sue and George's management of this situation compare with the handling of the last crisis you lived through on a software project? I'm betting the software project management team came a distant second--if they even recognized they had a crisis.

There are many ways in which software development poses unique challenges. At times we are sidetracked by the imposition of disciplines from other fields not suitable to our endeavors. But I think we can learn a lesson from how this hotel crisis was managed.

Of course we have to use discretion when declaring a crisis. One important difference between the software world and the hoteliers' is that our crises often extend over a longer period and require more complex actions to resolve. We need to take care of logistics and protect our people from exhausting their stamina.

But if we can learn to deal with our crises as well as George and Sue managed theirs, we can make significant gains in managing our projects successfully. Maybe we can even keep the (bed) bugs at bay!