

Sophie's Choice

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"We have to get creative about these numbers!"

Sophie looked at Daniel in disbelief. "Did our program manager really say what I thought he said?"

She looked at Harry, the project manager, but could not read his face. As test manager, she was outranked by the two men in Daniel's office and uncertain how to react.

Sophie had just given Daniel the statistics for the past week's testing. As in previous weeks, her testers had logged a large number of critical bugs while managing to execute only half the number of test cases required to meet the project timelines. The number of open bugs grew every week. At that rate of progress, there was no hope that the system could go live on the scheduled date.

She asked, "Can you explain what you mean by that, Daniel?"

Daniel's reply was unequivocal. "We can't keep showing so little progress on so many test cases. Look at this! Twenty-one hundred test cases is a ridiculous number. I'm sure many of these already were done during string test. We can deem those complete."

In a trice, he had changed the numbers on his screen, reducing the total number of test cases to 1600. Harry chimed in, suggesting test cases shown as "started" could be restated as "executed," making the picture much more positive.

"But that's completely inaccurate," Sophie said. "Those started test cases haven't yet reached the pass/fail point. As my numbers show, many of them are blocked. And before deeming anything complete, we need to investigate with the testers. Many of the tests executed in string test are failing in system test."

Daniel turned from his screen and, smiling, said to Sophie, "I think we're done. This is how I want you to report the numbers from now on."

Heart pounding, she replied, "I can't do that, Daniel. My job is to tell the truth as I see it. What you do with that information afterward is up to you."

As she returned to her desk, Sophie's mind was racing. How could she continue to do her job? She could not—would not—provide false reports. Neither her

personal values nor her professional standards would permit it. Yet clearly Daniel expected it.

Daniel was in trouble, she knew. The project was \$10 million over budget. There was enormous management pressure to launch the new system and stop the bleed. According to Daniel, a lot of jobs were on the line, including his.

They had been in system test for three months with no end in sight. End-to-end systems integration test was scheduled to start in four weeks. Sophie knew it could not.

She pondered her influence with Daniel. For weeks, Daniel had insisted the team must test faster. Sophie had persistently argued that the poor quality of this big system impeded testing. It would be a better use of resources to stop testing and clean up development. But Daniel refused to hear her, even though the test team was finding a critical bug for every two test cases they tried to execute. He insisted testing continue, demanding weekend work and repeatedly exhorting the team to "Think of this as a life-and-death situation!"

Daniel trusted Harry. If Sophie could persuade Harry to give accurate numbers, maybe he could convince Daniel. She went to see Harry and asked, "Does Daniel really intend to fudge the testing numbers for his status reports?"

Impassively, Harry replied, "He's presenting a different view."

"It's not the truth! What can he hope to accomplish? The system is in terrible shape. If he keeps ignoring the issues and pushing the project forward, the launch will be a disaster and it will all catch up with him anyway."

Harry was pragmatic. "Daniel's the boss. What he wants, we do."

"Uh-uh," said Sophie. "No responsible test manager could do what Daniel is asking."

The following day, Daniel invited her to a friendly chat. He said her greatest skill was as a test strategist. With the end-to-end test fast approaching, she urgently needed to focus her attention on preparing for it. "System test," he said smoothly, was "chugging along in execution mode" and didn't need her skills. Harry could take it over.

Inwardly, Sophie knew that Daniel was sidelining her so he and Harry could manipulate the statistics. But it was true that the end-to-end test would need attention sometime. She had put her heart and soul into this project. Desperately wanting it to succeed, she persuaded herself she still could do some good by staying on and managing end-to-end.

As she worked with a small team to prepare for end-to-end, Sophie saw the system test status reports begin to show breakthrough progress. But she had lost direct contact with system test, and lacked evidence for her suspicions. She was no longer part of the project's inner circle.

Part of the preparation for end to end involved executing a test to verify the system's financial integrity. Progress was slow, and each attempt found new bugs. Just before the end-to-end start date, Sophie's team had executed only 10 percent of the financial test. Yet according to the official status reports, system test was complete. The project management team had actually stopped reporting on it. How could this be?

Sophie located the raw data for system test and spent an evening analyzing and restating the statistics according to standard practices. She found that system test was less than 50 percent complete. Only half the test cases had been executed to a pass/fail point, with 102 failures. The rate of arrival for critical bugs continued high, with forty to eighty reported weekly. There were nearly one hundred unresolved high-severity bugs. According to her calculations, the abandoned test cases would have found at least 400 more.

Shocked into clear thinking, Sophie realized she had been fooling herself. She should have acted decisively right after talking to Harry—resigned, blown the whistle, or both.

To protect herself, she copied all the test progress data to take home, along with the true and false reports.

The next day, Sophie deliberately walked into the axe. She showed Daniel the revised statistics, saying she could see no possibility of adequately testing the system before the scheduled launch date. Daniel said they would launch as planned and fire-fight outstanding issues in production. Sophie said, "You can't. It's too broken." Daniel disagreed emphatically.

As she expected, Sophie was fired from the project. Later, she realized that leaving was the best possible outcome for her. She should have heeded the warning signs and quit much earlier. She wrote a report for herself, detailing what had happened, resolving that in future she would record disturbing events as they occurred.

Daniel was wrong. It took many months of expensive work before the system could go live. When it launched, there were major production problems, causing a further \$1 million in business losses. Daniel was later fired.

Story Lines

- Any time you detect the slightest hint you might be asked to fudge test statistics, immediately make it clear you don't do that.
- This is a no-win situation for a test manager, leaving you with limited options. You can:
 - refuse to play and try to talk management out of fudging the statistics
 - keep careful records and start working on your exit strategy
 - blow the whistle—but then be prepared to leave anyway
- Whether you stay or leave, keep and securely store good notes with dates.
- If you decide to blow the whistle, go over the heads of the people fudging the numbers to the people receiving the false status.
- Try to maintain emotional distance from your work. If you can keep perspective, you will make better decisions.