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11:30AM

WHY ARE MY PANTS ON FIRE?

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Why Are My Pants on Fire?



A Story of Software Pyromaniacs

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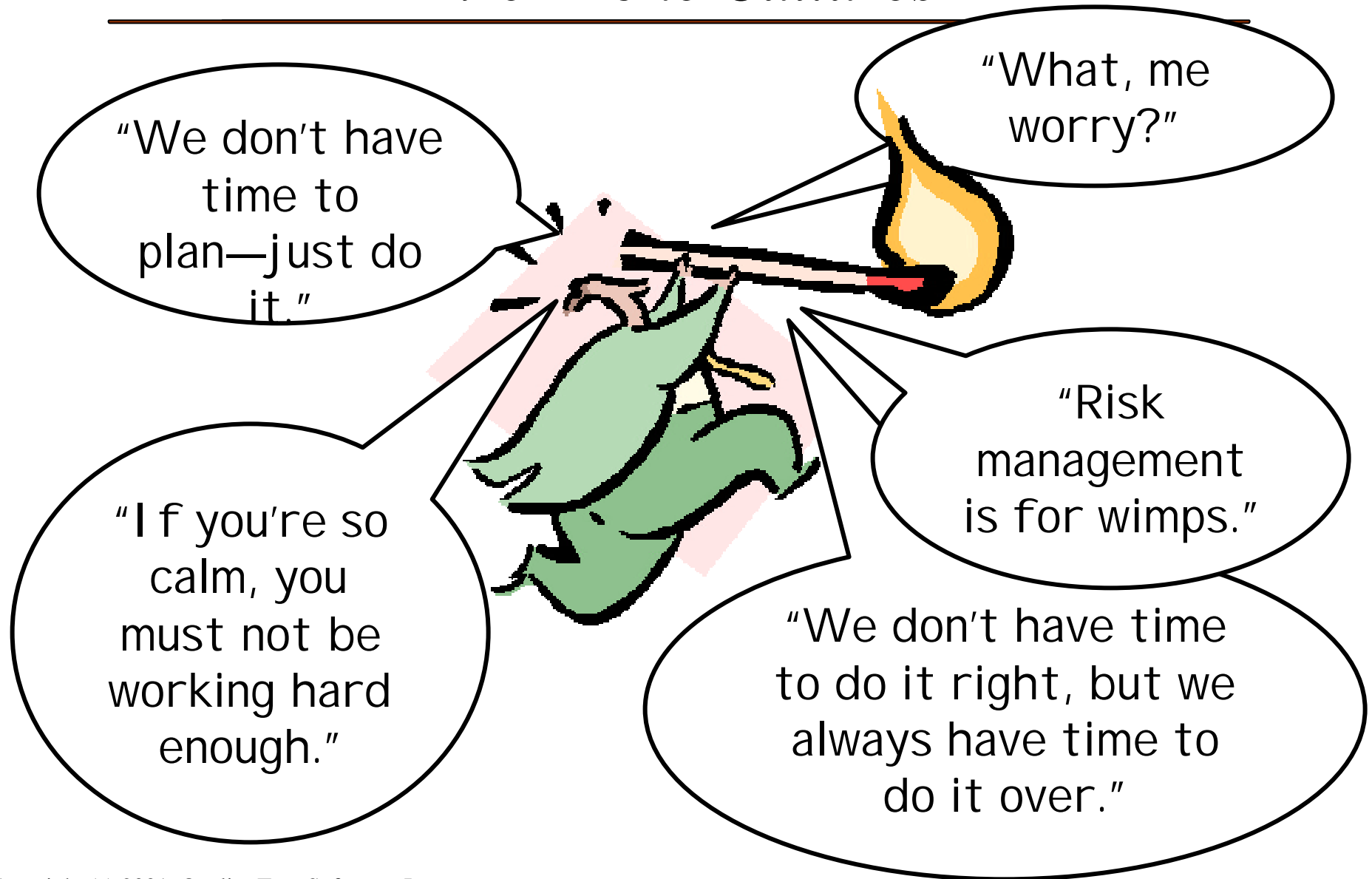
Aieeee! What's Going On?



Does this sound familiar?

- I'm too busy handling crises to think about preventing them.
- Everything seems to go wrong, even the things I think can't go wrong.
- It's "crunch time" all the time.
- I'm in a state of panic almost from the minute I walk in the door in the morning.

Fire-Prone Cultures



Decisions

Fire-prone decisions are made:

- Despite the absence of critical information.
- By the wrong person or group.
- Without considering the other stakeholders.
- By default.



Arsonists

Ever worked with someone who:

- Waffles or sits on decisions until it's too late?
- Procrastinates on routine matters until they're emergencies?
- Refuses to plan?
- Thrives on chaos?



*Sometimes the best
firefighters are also the best
arsonists.*

The Fun of Firefighting

Here I come
to save the
day!



The appeal of firefighting:

- Rush of adrenaline
- Quick gratification
- Recognition
- Rewards

Self-Sabotage

We don't mean to set fires.

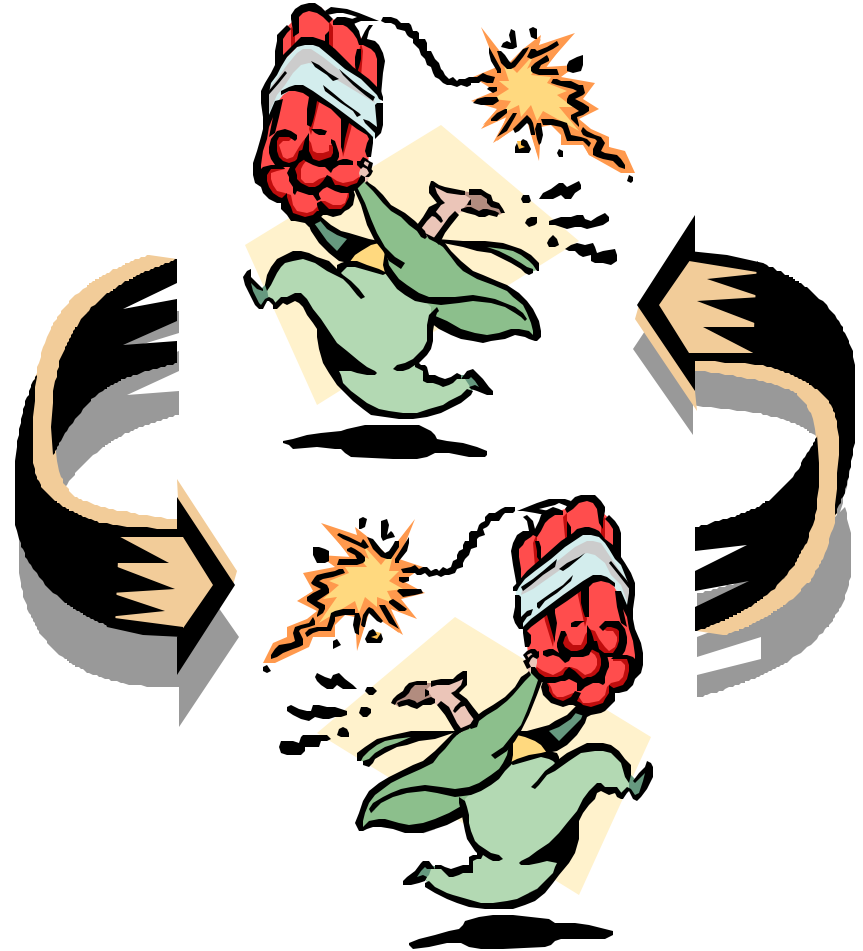
And yet:

- We do what we know, not necessarily what is needed.
- We don't think through the implications of our decisions.
- We don't ask the right questions.
- We don't ask enough questions.
- We do what we think we're supposed to do instead of what we think is right.



Vicious Cycle of Emergencies

- Patches cause problems that lead to more patches.
- Expedited jobs cause slow downs that lead to more expedited jobs.
- Emergencies consume resources causing more emergencies.



Make a Firebreak

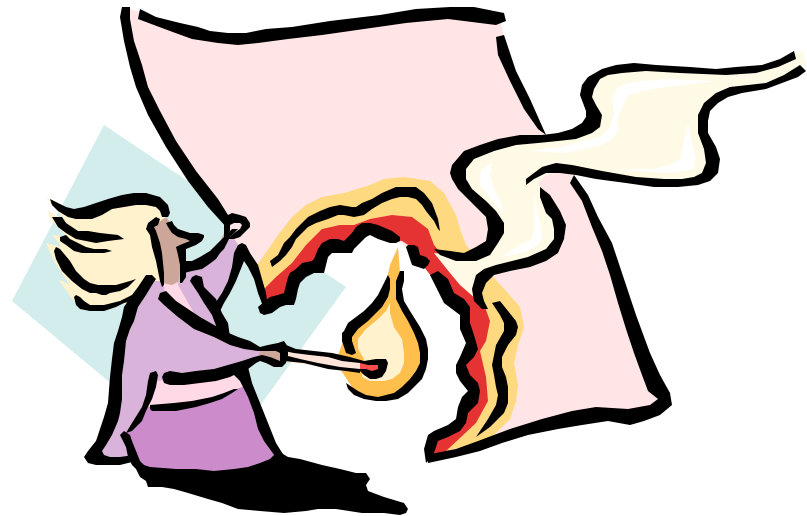


When fighting chronic fires:

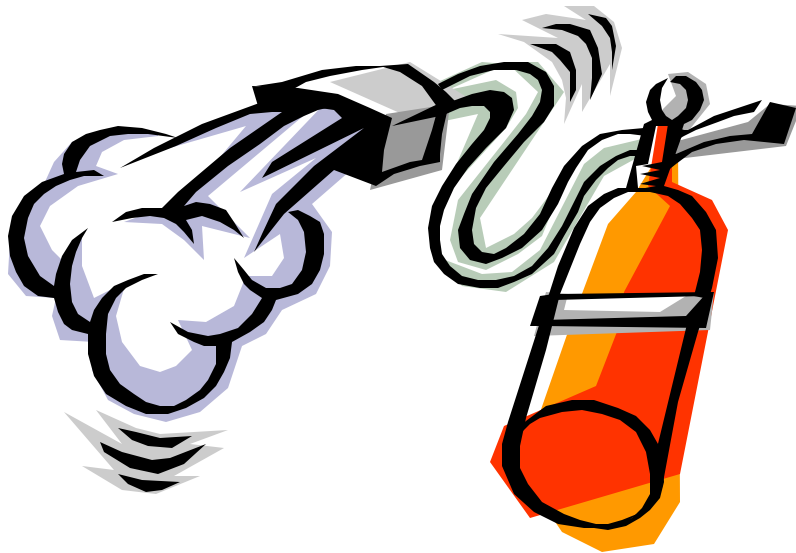
- Look at the big picture, not each incident.
- Insulate staff on critical projects
- Partition resources

Let Some Things Burn

- What do we stand to lose by letting this fire burn?
- What else can we do with the resources that would otherwise be fighting the fire?
- Who might notice if we let this one burn?



Handle Arsonists



- Three cases:
 - They work for you
 - They work with you
 - You work for them
- In general:
 - Make them aware of the effects of their actions.
 - Get support from the rest of the team.

Reward Behavior You Want Repeated



Who is more likely to garner kudos? The engineer who...

- Stays all night to make a delivery date (with code that only kinda meets requirements)
- Stays all night to stabilize the code (fixing bugs she put in the code in the first place)
- Delivers solid code on time (quietly, without fanfare, on low visibility projects)

Serious Fires Deserve Autopsies

- After every emergency, seek to understand:
 - What (not who!) caused the problem?
 - What were the contributing factors?
 - What did this fire cost us both in terms of damage and effort to contain it?
 - How can we prevent it next time?



Look for Resources Other Than Time



It's tempting to think, "If we just had more time, these emergencies wouldn't happen."

More time doesn't always help. Perhaps the problem is a need for improved:

- Motivation
- Skill
- Direction
- Communication

Fire Prevention

- Planning ahead
- Rewarding solid performers over heroes
- Learning from past disasters
- Looking for common sources of fire drills

*And yet, as we all know,
preventing fires isn't that
easy.*



So Why ARE My Pants on Fire?

Because someone
was playing with
matches...

*...and that
someone might
have been me!*

