



38-Minute Missile Threat Provides an Emotional Lesson

By Kevin Nakamoto, P.E., and Corey Matsuoka, P.E.

It was a clear, sunny Hawaiian morning on Saturday, January 13th, and I had just finished warming up my daughter's soccer team, which was preparing to take the field when a message flashed on my cell phone: **"BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."**

Naturally, I did what any quick-thinking engineer would do. I moved the team to a shelter inside the park's hollow tile restroom. It would be 38 minutes before state officials broadcast another message declaring: **"THERE IS NO MISSILE THREAT OR DANGER TO THE STATE OF HAWAII. REPEAT. FALSE ALARM."**

Too late. This was the scariest 38 minutes of my life – not to mention the lives of 11 frightened 10-year-old girls.

Meanwhile, Honolulu resident Noah Tom had just dropped off his oldest daughter at the airport and was picking up breakfast for a meeting when he heard the alert. His two younger children were at home, and his wife was already at work. "I literally sent out 'I love you' texts to as many family members as I could. It was kind of surreal at that point," he told *The Washington Post*.

When he heard the alert was a mistake, Tom had not yet made it home. Instead, he pulled over to the side of the road and cried. "I just broke down at that point. It all kind of hit me in a wave, what I had just gone through. I was unable to drive for 20 or 30 minutes," he said.

I now know that scientists estimate a ballistic missile originating from North Korea would take approximately 20 minutes to reach the state of Hawaii – only 20 minutes until life as you know it changes forever.

So, it is not hard to imagine the anger and uproar from my fellow Aloha State citizens criticizing state officials for taking 38 minutes to send out a message retracting the original alert.

The emergency management agency did not understand the expectation of the public and the consequences of the time it took to rescind the alert. In the public's eye, it did not act with enough urgency to inform them of the mistake. In the era of social media, smartphones, and instant gratification, an immediate update was expected.

The emergency management agency misunderstood the needs of the people it serves or its clients – whether it was terrified little girls or a father crying on the side of the road – who needed to know an important fact sooner rather than later.

The same theory works for engineering. You need to know your client's expectations on a project and answer these important questions:

- Do you really know what is important to them? Is it the schedule, cost control, quality, responsiveness, or something else?
- What do they worry about going wrong on the project? Is it the loss of funding, exposure to public criticism, exposure to lawsuits, or something else?

Once you understand the answers to those questions, you can tailor your project management style to meet the client's needs and provide strategies to mitigate those concerns.

Of paramount importance is being able to communicate this understanding to your client, which means identifying an effective communication plan. At a minimum, the plan should contain how, what, and when you will communicate with your client. Larger and more complicated projects will need more frequent communication to ensure a smooth delivery.

This is especially true if you seek to manage your client's expectations. While a client expecting perfection might not be realistic, urgent responses and constant communication in response to errors are logical expectations. It is the project manager's responsibility to ensure the client's expectations are in sync with reality. Regular and effective communication is a great tool to make this happen.

Finally, inquire of your clients about how they treat their own clients. This should give you a feel of how they, in turn, appreciate being treated.

Not long ago, I asked a successful architectural client who recently retired about his firm's approach to client service. His response: "You need to be in front of the client, showing them that you are absorbed in the success of their project. Show enthusiasm and urgency."

In other words, to maximize your opportunity for positive project outcomes, never leave a client confused at any stage about what is clearly going on.▪



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