



# Project Buster

**A View from Impact Factory**

**Robin Chandler and Jo Ellen Grzyb**

**Impact Factory Copyright ©2023**

## Turning a Project Around

### First of all – Don't Fix It!

For those of us who work with projects that involve many suppliers, stakeholders, champions, budget holders, clients, partners, colleagues etc, a challenging, difficult or even a failing project can become an all consuming nightmare.

Getting some perspective on the issues and difficulties can be almost impossible if your focus is constantly on trying to fix it. Understandably, that's what most of us are drawn to do: fix the problem.

But before you can fix it you have to get some perspective on more than the obvious problem. The following process will help you gain new insight into just what is going on and what can be done about it.

First we need to look at a couple of areas that are vital to any project's success.

### Commitment

If you look at your own commitments in life, you will find that everything you are committed to costs you. It will either be time, money or effort. This is the acid test for commitment: "are you investing?"

There is only so much you can be committed to because you only have so much time, money and energy.

You will find, if you look, that there are things you used to be committed to that have fallen off the bottom of your list as something more important has come along. Typical things will be sport, friends, clubs, and evenings out. This is the way it is supposed to work.

However, if we get over committed we *always* come to grief. We find ourselves exhausted, broke or working all the hours God sends and still not catching up.

Getting uncommitted is the way we manage overload in our lives. There are a few ways to get uncommitted: you can decide that enough is enough and choose what gets dropped from the commitment list; you can be forced, through circumstance to change what you're committed to; you can deliberately change your circumstances to instigate a change of commitment.

But some things you will find are in a sort of halfway house. They are things we used to be committed to that we *still* say we're committed to that we really aren't. They are in the "Lip Service" category. Typical things here might be to belong to a gym because we're "committed" to getting fit, yet we never go.

Sometimes we will even cheat and say we're committed to something we *know* we aren't really committed to because it makes us look good.

### It works the same way in business

This is just the way it works and it works exactly the same way when it comes to projects. Over time people will shift from committed to lip service to uncommitted to pretending to be committed and back again. This is just people managing their workload and resources.

It is not "wrong" for someone who was committed to the success of a project not to see through that

commitment. They may well have had the very best of intentions at the beginning, but the world has moved on and they now don't have the time, energy, sense of purpose, etc.

The trap we all fall into when this happens is to feel that they "should" remain committed. Then we will spend a lot of our time and effort trying to make them shape up.

Incidentally we are very good at this. If you look at the things you are committed to you will find many of them you do because someone else keeps you on track.

However, spending time and effort trying to get someone who is backing out of their commitment to honour it is exhausting. You might have them morally but if they have no time, money or resource you are destined for frustration and disappointment.

Far better to look for where the real commitment is, or where more real commitment can be created. In terms of projects, if something happens, it's because someone somewhere in the loop is committed to making it happen. It doesn't have to be the leader or instigator, just someone who's not prepared to let things slide.

Anyone you can identify as truly committed to a project is automatically a key stakeholder. Key stakeholders are prime targets for developing your sphere of influence. So what's a sphere of influence?

### Spheres of Influence/Stakeholders

A sphere of influence is quite simply the people you know or have access to who will listen to what you have to say and possibly be swayed by it: you have influence with them. However, there may be people you need to influence to whom you don't have access; they are outside your sphere of influence. So what do you do then?

There is always more than one way to skin a cat. Say the person you are dealing with won't play ball or is obstructive. When this happens to us in life we mostly look for a way round it, we look for someone else, some other avenue to try.

Sometimes we will go above people's heads "Can I speak to a supervisor/manager?" Sometimes we will walk, we will just go somewhere else or change supplier. Sometimes we will feel so aggrieved we will start a protest group and try to shift something that way.

The point is that we may not have direct influence over particular people or situations, but we can bring influence to bear through a third party that we *can* get to.

Key stakeholders may not necessarily be within your sphere of influence or open to influence by you. Indeed they are sometimes opposed to your ideas on principle.

## Identifying key stakeholders:

**Those who you currently can influence**  
**Those you don't have access to**  
**Those who oppose you**  
**Those with an agenda of their own**  
**Those who hold the budget**

However, by seeking out people you do have access to who in turn have access to key stakeholders, your effort is being used appropriately; rather than what usually happens, which is to complain about the people we don't have access to!

Judiciously using or expanding your spheres of influence bypasses the difficulty.

## Putting it all together

The following process is best done with two or three colleagues who know your business but are not necessarily closely involved in your failing project.

- 1) Take a look at a project that was or is successful and ask yourself the following questions:
  - a) What did you do that made it work?
  - b) Which of your many skills did you use?
  - c) Where was the commitment?
  - d) Who was bought in and why?
  - e) Were there any people outside your Sphere of Influence that you were able to get to via someone else?
- 2) Now introduce a challenging, difficult or even failing project. Outline it to your colleagues so that they know what is going on. You don't need to do this in too much depth, just enough to get them up to speed.
- 3) Now your first task is to come up with a plan to make it worse. Really go to town on this, it is a brilliant tool to get everyone thinking outside the box. What could you do that would totally scupper it? What could you do that might result in you or others being sacked or disciplined? What would result in a failure of Nick Leeson proportions? What would tie it up in knots and leave it to die a lingering death?
- 4) Next try to define the ideal for this project. What would things be like if it were a wonderful success? Again this is a stretching process so don't skip it, really go overboard.

- 5) Ok. So now draw a square divided like the one shown here and use it to categorise all the people involved.

Once you think you've included everybody, see if you can define their role as one of the following (they may fit more than one)

Decision maker  
Implementer  
Must agree  
Has to contribute

This may prompt you to add new names to the lists.

Are there any people or even one person who could make a difference if their position was shifted?

- 6) Ask yourself the following questions. Spend some time on each. Remember these are not things you are going to do they are just possibilities.

- What would really help to make this situation more manageable?  
Not what would fix it, but would take some of the difficulty out of it.
- Is there anyone new you could you enrol?
- Is there anyone else who hasn't been involved who could make a difference?
- Are you able to influence them?
- If not, identify who you **do** have access to, who could influence the situation.

Avoid trying to shift the blockages; rather compensate for and go round them.

- What is the best use of your energy?  
Ideally you should be looking for something that won't require you to do the work.

- Make a list of rules, standards within which you operate, and include expectations you have of others in the way you think they ought to treat you.
- Now, see if you can identify what the situation looks like from the other side. What do you think their rules, standards and expectations are?
- To push the envelope a little further come up with a sneaky, immoral, illegal, less sensible, morally unacceptable plan. Push the limits of what is acceptable and allowable: think blackmail, scandal, hit squad, sex, bribery, etc.
- Next, make a list of what could keep you a victim to this situation or problem. This is key. It is very easy to stay negative and a 'prisoner' of the situation, feeling you have no power over it. However, the more you stay a victim to it, the more you give up any chance of changing it.

Now think of a few things that would keep you an active participant.

<p>Champions</p> <p>J Bloggs</p>	<p>Blockages</p> <p>A Person</p>
<p>On the Fence</p> <p>Sales</p>	<p>Lip Service</p> <p>Chairman</p>

11) Finally, have a think about one or two things you could do immediately that would make a real difference, and certainly would make you feel better! Take a look at your various lists and see if there's anything on them that could be adapted which would improve things (try choosing something from your sneaky plan and putting a realistic spin on it and see what you come up with). And of course, there may be new things you haven't thought of yet.

By the time you get to the end of this process you should at least have some objectivity and perspective about the issues. In the past we have found such insights as:

"Oh well, we'll just go round him then."

"We might as well park it for 6 months and then have another look."

"I'll just publish the names of those responsible for content right up there on the web page."

Wherever you get to, just going over the project objectively like this can relieve the frustration and sense of helplessness so often associated with failure, and can get your creativity back on track.

**If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on project management, please phone: 020 7226 1877 or e-mail: [enquiries@impactfactory.com](mailto:enquiries@impactfactory.com)**