

The Four Myths of Project Breakdown (And How to Transform Them Into Breakthroughs)

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Abstract - Could you, or someone you know, be undermining your project's success and the impact of your technology by clinging to one of four widely held myths about project breakdown. Read on — you might be surprised.

I. INTRODUCTION

When projects breakdown, technology is often prescribed with the same blind faith we attach to antibiotics— upgrade your software, shift from critical path to critical chain, or use Monte Carlo algorithms to calculate your risks and call us in the morning. Too often, these powerful interventions fail because they do not address the root of the problem.

Project management is people management and the root of the problem is almost always a breakdown in communication between people. Before dismissing this statement as either obvious or simplistic, consider the list of project breakdowns in the side bar. All of these success barriers are either caused or complicated by poor communication.

Over the past twelve years, I have had the opportunity, to coach project teams in some of the fastest companies on earth. I always begin our work together by showing them this list of *The Ten Most Common Project Complaints* and ask if any of these things are frustrating their success. The answer is always — all of them!

These breakdowns repeat themselves over and over again in our project organizations because of four myths, which have become so much a part of most project cultures that we accept them, and even perpetuate them, without question. By dispelling these myths we can transform this list of chronic breakdowns into project breakthroughs.

The Ten Most Common Project Complaints *

1. Everyone enters the project **running on overload.**
2. Rushing leads to **poorly defined goals** at the project's inception.
3. **Unrealistic completion dates** leave the team feeling they've been "set up to fail."
4. A sense of urgency causes **poor communication.**
5. Feeling the crunch, the **planning effort** is reduced or skipped entirely.
6. **Other departments fail to support the project** creating delays.
7. Continued breakdowns trigger **blame and finger pointing.**
8. **Scope expands** as customers request additional features.
9. **Endless meetings** to sort it all out lack focus, run too long, rehash the same territory, are dominated by a few people, and fail to produce or complete action items.
10. **Constant fire fighting** consumes ever more time and effort.

* B. Flicker, *Working At Warp Speed*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2002.

II. THE FOUR MYTHS

Technology is logical and precise while people tend to get emotional and their issues messy. It's no wonder then, that we see technology as part of the solution and people as part of the problem. When I ask clients to pin point the causes of the ten most common project complaints they point to other people as the primary culprits. This distrust of others is often subtle but pervasive, and is the source of the four myths of project breakdown.

For example, why do we face unrealistic deadlines? Upper management just plucks them out of the air. Why does scope keep expanding? Customers have no idea what it really takes to get the job done or marketers don't have courage to say "no." Why don't I have the support I need? Because many of my co-workers are idiots. Myth One sees the primary obstacle to project success as "the idiots out there."

If other people are the problem, wouldn't increased communication be an obvious solution? It may be obvious, but it is rarely well implemented. Why? Myth Two insists, "Communication takes too long." This sets up a brutal self-fulfilling prophecy. We give short shrift to the time it takes to communicate effectively. Poor communication leads to mistakes that forces us to redo or undo already completed work. This, in turn, eats up more valuable time, which leads to even less communication.

All of this inevitably leads to a great deal of pain and stress in the system. Pain is a feedback mechanism meant to change our behavior — hopefully for the better. When we touch a hot stove we pull our hand away. A feedback loop that has us respond to scorched fingers by pushing our whole hand against the burning stove has gone dangerously wrong. That's the nightmare of Myth Three, which confuses stress with success — no pain, no gain. We have turned the feedback of failure on its head. Instead of correcting course, we often redouble our efforts.

Safe refuge from all this pain and confusion seems to lie in the clarity of numbers. Myth Four imagines that if we just "hit the numbers" everything will be okay.

Over the past decade these myths have produced numbers that are far from okay. In one benchmark study conducted by the Standish Group [1] in 1995, of the \$250 billion spent in the U.S. each year on IT projects, \$81 billion was wasted on canceled software projects — that's almost one third. Three years later, in 1998, they calculated the odds of a Fortune 500 software development project coming in on time and on budget — only 25 percent succeeded. That translated into project overruns and failures totaling \$97 billion. And those are just the failures that we know about. The majority of project failures are covered up, ignored, and/or rationalized.

Who would think that the ten most common project complaints could lead to such awful bottom-line consequences? The complaints, the horrible numbers and the myths that keep them locked in place can all be significantly alleviated by following four basic rules that lead to greater project success.

A. Myth One: It's the idiots out there

Solution: Avoid confusion through inclusion

The inevitable corollary to "idiots out there" thinking is the old maxim, "If you want it done right, you better do it yourself." This is not a particularly helpful frame of reference in a team sport like project management. In fact, any time I encounter an over-worked project manager I am almost sure to find an under-utilized team. The solution: *Avoid confusion through inclusion.*

This means doing a better job of including our customer, not just at the beginning of the project, but continually so that as things change, both for the customer and within the project itself, we can make the required adjustments together. It also means including the entire core team in the planning process so that everyone develops a sense of ownership for the project early on. Better inclusion during the planning stage also enables us to discover conflicts and potential breakdowns on paper rather than in an implementation crisis.

Recently, an experienced project manager who participated in one of my training sessions made the painful and shocking discovery that, despite her understanding of all the concepts listed above and her thorough documentation of

the project objective and the work breakdown structure (WBS), her team was unaware of much of the work she had done. A very simple staged methodology with increased feedback built in were all that was necessary to avoid this confusion. However, too often a misperception of time constraints causes us to resist even these simple steps so that we stumble blindly from Myth One into Myth Two.

B. *Myth Two: We don't have time to communicate*

Solution: Shift from racing to pacing

Our warp speed world keeps us in a state of constant urgency. Too often we operate under the false belief that if we are not continually doing something opportunity will slip away. Better to "shoot first and ask questions later."

This bias against communicating with one another and taking time to plan before we act underlies every one of the ten most common project complaints. I try to inoculate clients against this tendency for frantic, counter-productive action with the rule that encourages them to — *Shift from racing to pacing*.

Effective pacing means that, at certain points, we're going to trade speed for accuracy. Think of it this way: you're racing to a friend's house at 60 miles per hour. You come to a stretch of road on which you know you'll have to make a turn, but you can't remember exactly which street to turn on. If you want to read the street signs to find the right road you're going to slow down. If you miss the turn the speed is useless.

You'll probably break going into the turn as well. In other words, when you're making key connections or changing direction it pays to slow down. When you know the turf or have a wide-open stretch of road you can open it up.

Involving people takes time. Is it worth it? The all-action-all-the-time model only pays attention to the cost if we do. What gets overlooked is the cost if we don't.

The cost when we don't is quantified by the Standish Group reports. When we *Shift from racing to pacing* we have a better shot at getting the mix between talk and action back in balance. Unfortunately, this balance is made particularly

difficult to maintain because of a distorted sense of effectiveness introduced by Myth Three.

C. *Myth Three: Stress equals success*

Solution: Work from the zone.

I once coached a media distribution company through a major capital improvements project. By following the systems approach we mapped out early on and, aided by an exceptional run of luck, they brought it in on time, on budget and without a single major glitch. A few months later one of the key contributors told me that, about midway through the project, the project manager became convinced that, despite the glowing numbers, something must be seriously wrong because nobody was "freaking out."

We laughed about this story, but this confusion between stress and productivity is no laughing matter. Over the past twenty years the "no pain, no gain" approach to life has moved from the gym to the workplace with disastrous results. For example, the California Workers' Compensation Institute [2] reports that claims for mental stress increased by almost 700 percent between 1979 and 1989. Work-related stress accounts for \$200-300 billion a year in lost productivity and continues to rise.

Workplace stress expert Professor Cary Cooper, of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology said [3]: "Until now, employers have associated stress with the occasional headache or day off work. However, they should be really concerned when three-quarters of workers say their performance is affected by stress."

When we become overwhelmed by constant fire fighting and work overload (which many people believe is the definition of project work) the brain goes into emergency mode and starts pumping out cortisol as well catecholamines. "But we do our best work," says Daniel Goleman author of *Working With Emotional Intelligence* [4], "at a lower level of brain arousal, when only the catecholamine system is engaged." In other words, the brain chemicals that generate enthusiasm for a challenge are different from those that respond to stress and threat.

Keeping this distinction in mind can make a huge difference in how we manage and motivate people. In between a sense of overload on the one extreme and boredom on the other we experience a zone of optimal performance that best engages our biochemistry. And the guideline to help us remember this "sweet spot" in human performance is *Work from the zone*.

This means paying attention to the context of our tasks as well as the content. Why does this task matter? Why do I care? Why does anybody care? Out of caring comes commitment. In its absence we get only compliance. The speed, complexity and interdependence of our projects require the passion, energy, and creative thinking that only comes from commitment.

Engendering this level of commitment becomes much easier when we address the fourth and final myth. Remembering our core purpose in project work is key to breaking free of the other three myths as well.

D. Myth Four: Satisfy the specification by any means necessary

Solution: Both the people and the project must be fulfilled.

Is delivering a project to specification, on time, and within budget an adequate definition of project success? It's not if our customer is unhappy. In over a decade of project management training and consulting I have never found a group that didn't have multiple stories of projects that satisfied the numbers but disappointed the customer. It's our version of the old joke in which the operation was a success but the patient died.

The final rule I ask my clients to keep in mind states that — *Both the people and the project must be fulfilled.*

It is easy, in our warp speed, bottom line driven world, to run our projects and our companies strictly by the numbers. Enron is the awful outcome of this mindset taken to its nightmare extreme. Although none of us would deliberately throw our employees, coworkers, shareholders, and fellow citizens to the wolves as did the Enron brass, we can, at times, allow a preoccupation with numbers and technology to eclipse the real needs of the people they are meant to serve.

The list of the ten most common project complaints provides a quick check against this tendency. Listening for these concerns can tell us when and where disconnects are occurring. By increasing the inclusion of customers and team members, by pacing our projects and ourselves appropriately, and by remembering how important it is to work from the zone we will stimulate solutions that keep the balance between the people and the numbers in check.

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